ace book
37600
60¢

An exciting new novel of counter-espionage based on the popular ABC TV series

IT TAKES A THIEF #3

APPOINTMENT IN CAIRO

by Gil Brewer

Assignment: Danger!

Noah Bain said, "We've learned that the statuette is in the State Museum, right here in Cairo. But Russia is after the ancient formula, and so is Red China. The news leaked and leaked, Al.

"This gas can completely cripple a continent in a matter of hours. It's devastating, frightening to even consider. . . ."

Suddenly Noah Bain stopped talking.

Al said, "Okay, dad—what else is there?"

"I don't know exactly how to say it," Noah said slowly. "Al, word is out that both Russia and Red China have sent men with orders to kill you on sight."

Appointment in Cairo is based on the exciting ABC-Universal Television series

IT TAKES A THIEF, starring Robert Wagner.

For information on the earlier books in this exciting series, see page 158.

IT TAKES A THIEF #3

APPOINTMENT IN CAIRO

by Gil Brewer

AN ACE BOOK

Ace Publishing Corporation
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10036

APPOINTMENT IN CAIRO

Copyright ©, 1970, by Universal Television.

An Ace Book. All Rights Reserved.

Printed in U.S.A.

I

The Cairo taxi drew to the curb in busy Al Sheikh Ali Youssef Street. Al Mundy, lean, scowling, opened the door and got out. He felt troubled and unhappy.

Paying the rotund, plump-faced Arab driver with currency provided by the ever-thoughtful SIA, Al inquired about David's Place, a local oasis he'd been told was on this street.

"*Mutta Shakker,*" the man said, smiling widely. "It is a big street, this."

"I'm well aware of that," Al said, feeling a sudden tiredness. "But David's Place? You know of this?"

"Ah, *awwa.* David's Place." The man scratched oily black hair. "You are looking for this David's Place?"

Al sighed. Maybe it was something they saw in his eyes, some sign.

"*Men fadlak,*" the man said. "*Ali—*"

"Stick with the English," Al said. "I'm damned if I know what you're talking about."

"*'An isnak,*" the man said, holding up a white, creased palm, his entire face a pie-like smile. "Excuse, please. I am certainly with the English. I make the scene. Yes?"

"Your gourd is radiant," Al said.

"Ah, yes," the man said. "My gourd. I dig the gourd." He tapped his head with a brown finger. "Now, David's Place." He paused, frowned, and shook his head. Then

abruptly his eyes lit up. He lifted both hands from the steering wheel. "We are two fish in the river," he said. "We swim among the weeds in the river, and we are blinded by the ferns. The carp is coming."

Al sighed again, his stomach muscles tightening.

"There," the man said. "Behind you. Behold, David's Place!"

Al turned. The sign was blatant. It was a middling café, the façade trimmed heavily with gold and crimson filigree, and colorful draperies showing behind the muzzy windows. He glanced back at the Arab taxi driver.

"Thanks," he said.

"*Hassana. Ahlan wa sahlan,*" the man said, smiling.

"*Saeeda,*" Al said.

"Goodbye, my friend. And beware of the carp."

The taxi drew away from the curb and vanished swiftly into traffic.

These were the things that made for a precarious existence. Al tightened his lips. A few more onions like that cab driver, and he might damned well turn into a fish.

It was no time for levity. He had been in Cairo once before, long ago, with his father, Alister Mundy, on a fast jewelry job. Exciting memories of a happier past. He had always wanted to return, spend some time in this fascinating Middle East town. El Qahira, the Victorious City. Named after the planet Mars.

Al moved slowly over to one of the front windows of the café and, turning, stood there, looking out on the street. He had just come from Cairo Airport, by way of Heliopolis, and his passport read: *Thomas Longren, Archaeologist, American.* The SIA had ordered him here from Washington, D.C. He had no luggage. He knew absolutely nothing of his assignment, except that

it must be of vital importance for them to send him here so precipitately, with only the clothes on his back. He hoped it had nothing to do with the war between Israel and the United Arab Republic. It was an old war that seemed forever young. They had been fighting on and off for twenty years. The U. S. was in sympathy with the Israelis, while Egypt played footsie with Russia, soliciting arms and planes. Al Mundy wanted none of it. Right now, the Suez Canal was under bombardment.

He stood in front of the café, trying to relax. He took out a cigarette, lit it. Moslems swarmed by on the walk, men in turbans and *galabias*—long, loose multicolored nightshirts. Western dress was prevalent. Fine looking women, chic and sophisticated, sauntered by, as elegant as Parisiennes. In Cairo there were Egyptians, Syrians, Arabs, Turks, Nubians, Sudanese, as well as people from all the European countries. Even though English was spoken everywhere, four out of five people were Moslems. Al was conscious of sky-probing minarets, and he had seen grand mosques. They were all places of Islamic worship.

Beware of the carp. . . .

Damn Noah. Where was he? There had been nothing said about Noah Bain when Al was ordered to Cairo. He missed Noah, missed being able to bait the man. Al permitted himself a small smile. He liked Noah. A special kind of intimacy had grown between them. The smile went away. Damn him just the same. He could have attempted to reach Al, given him some sort of explanation, just for the sake of old friendship. He was seldom sent on a mission knowing so little.

A cold wryness touched the level blue eyes, and the lean face seemed to harden. It was late morning in the

last days of September, but still fiercely warm in the ancient city. The sun rested like a blaze overhead; the skies were white, paling to yellow, with only a fine crust of blue around the edges. Al slipped out of his buff gray sport jacket, revealing a powder blue silk shirt, a carefully knotted dark tie. The silk had been just right in Washington; here it was a warm shower.

There was nothing to do but face the facts, then. Before reporting to a numbered house in Assurugiya Street, wherever the devil that was, he was supposed to meet a British MI5 agent by the name of Prince. Oh, marvelous. He had only been given the last name, a rotten inconsideration on the SIA's part. Prince was an experienced Egyptologist, according to commendation, and the man would be waiting here, at David's Place, dressed all in white, and with what? With, of all things, a yellow rose in his hatband. Sometimes the SIA people were like children, and in many ways as diabolically naïve. A yellow rose, yet. It all seemed inordinantly stupid to Al, but he knew from cruel experience that there would be some knife-edged plan behind it.

He sighed. To it, then.

Turning, he moved over to the doorway of the café and entered. It was dark, with an overpowering odor of coffee and incense. For long moments he could distinguish only shadowy shapes. A tinkle of music came from somewhere toward the back. He saw a bar to the right, with a man behind it. The man was watching him. Two Moslems sat at the bar, in orthodox dress, sipping drinks. It would probably not be alcohol.

Al looked around. He noticed three people seated at tables. Two men, and a woman in white with her back turned toward him. She was holding a tiny, slim

glass of greenish liquid. There was no sign of the British agent.

The barman cleared his throat. *"Sabah-el-Kheir!"*

"Hi," said Al.

"Men Fadlak," the man said, swabbing the bar with a damp cloth. "I can help you?"

Al sorely wanted a large cognac. He needed something to iron out the wrinkles, and he could almost taste the inspiring, volatile liquor. He moved to the bar.

"Brandy," he said.

"Ah."

"Make it a double."

"A large brandy. Right-ho!"

Served, he sipped, then downed the drink, fished out a handful of Egyptian pounds and some piasters and milliemes, change from the taxi driver. He paid the barman, turned and left the café.

Where was Prince?

Al hovered near the doorway. The door opened and the girl in white got up and stepped into view. She glanced at Al from beneath the flopping brim of a hat that somewhat resembled a Spanish peasant's, and moved to a table over by the right-side window.

Al looked her over. She was choice eye service, wearing a very short white mini-skirt, a white linen jacket, white lace stockings, white boots of highly polished, wet looking leather with big silver buckles. A white scarf was at her throat. She wore enormous, white-rimmed dark glasses. She carried a long-strapped white leather purse that was so huge, Al thought maybe it housed her motorcycle. She wore white gloves. At the front of her hat, in a broad, glistening band, was a burgeoning yellow rose.

The girl had long, black hair that dusted her shoulders.

Al stood there, staring at the yellow rose.

The dark glasses glinted toward him, then away.

The SIA was so damned childlike sometimes. Could this really be Prince? He checked the face, the fine features, the curve of the chin, the full-lipped, carefully carmined mouth. She wore a tiny mole at the corner of her lips. Al remembered another girl who wore a mole, and shuddered inside. An evil thought. This girl was beautiful, standing there, occasionally glancing toward him.

He cleared his throat and moved over to her.

"Would your name be Prince?"

She stared at him in high disdain.

"I do admire your rose," he said.

"You do?"

"Yeah. Look, were you supposed to meet someone here?"

"You're American?"

"Quite."

She had an exciting British accent, and it was catching. Her voice was slightly hoarse, rusty sounding.

The hell with it, he thought. "I'm Al Mundy."

She gave a great sigh. "Pleased to meet you. I saw you come inside. But I didn't know—really, it was your turn, you know? Really, I had only the briefest gen."

"You're not alone."

"I'm Rebecca Prince, Mr. Mundy."

"Al, please. We'll probably get to know each other quite well, and it saves time."

She was gentle and tentative in manner, and her beauty was precocious. She emanated an aura of breeding, and the hint that to touch would be to burn.

Al felt he was being imposed upon by the SIA. Sending him a girl. Would it be a girl's job? He doubted it. They could have warned him, given him at least a word about this. In one way he was disgusted, in another rather pleased.

"Assurugiya Street?" she asked softly.

"Assurugiya Street." He motioned toward the hustling traffic. "We'd better hail a cab. I can't understand why we couldn't've met where we're going."

"Oh, Mr. Mundy. We work for devious people."

"Al, huh?"

She smiled for the first time, revealing fine white teeth. "All right, Al."

They moved to the curb. Miss Prince was rather tall, and racily built. Al was immediately attracted to her. He took her arm, and felt a faint drawing away, a nervousness, a tense quality. Under those expensive clothes, Rebecca Prince was a thoroughbred, finely tuned, and the elusive, curiously allusive perfume she wore was flagrant treason.

They caught a cab and settled in the seat. Al gave the address to the driver, a slick-haired, knobby-shouldered cigar smoker who drove like a frightened dog.

"Do you know *anything*?" Al asked Rebecca Prince.

"Absolutely nothing. I don't even know whom we're meeting here."

"Whoever it is, he'll receive all the pleasure."

"You're a kidder, Mr. Mundy."

"I'm also truthful."

"So I've heard."

"Get rid of that rose, will you? It bores me, and you really don't need it."

She withdrew the rose from her hatband, kissed it lightly, and tossed it out the window.

They sped through the city, turned into a residential street, and halfway down the block parked abruptly in front of a large stone house, flanked by broad verandas, colorful awnings.

Al paid the driver and they moved up the walk, up the broad porch stairs and across the gallery. A large, glass-paned door opened.

"Hello, Al," a man said. It was Noah Bain.

II

"Oh, beautiful," Al said. "I might've known."

They stared at each other for a moment. Noah's bland face broke into a smile. He wore a neat brown sharkskin suit, white shirt, maroon tie, and his thinning hair was neatly combed. Then the smile went away, and Al saw the ubiquitous worry and concern in the SIA man's face.

"This is *Miss* Prince," Al said. "Noah Bain, the good father and minister of bloody imports."

Rebecca Prince nodded.

"I see Miss Prince surprised you, then," Noah said.

Al ignored this. "We going to stand out here, or are we allowed to come inside?"

Noah quickly ushered them into the house, apologizing. They moved down a broad hall and into a large living room, comfortably furnished in European contemporary, the walls colorful and startling with an array of brilliantly splashed nonrepresentational oil paintings, predominantly crimson and yellow. It was cool in here, and Al spotted an immense air-conditioner high against the ceiling.

Close to Noah's side, he said, "A yellow rose. In the hatband."

Noah glanced quickly at him.

"A girl," Al said. "A last name only. What're you trying to do, puzzle me?"

Noah sighed. "Now, Al—"

"No briefing on anything. In the dark," Al went on. "Utterly in the dark. Fly to Cairo. Meet Prince at David's Place. Take no luggage. Get on your horse, Mundy."

"I'm truly sorry, Al." Noah's voice was conciliatory. "Sorry, the man says."

Rebecca Prince had paused, turned, and was watching them. She took off her glasses, revealing dark blue, inspiring eyes that looked excited.

Noah cleared his throat. "Sit down. I want to get right with this thing."

Al could feel it coming. Everything was normal. Miss Prince took a chair, crossed her legs, and stared at Al. Al slumped on a broad couch. Noah began to pace back and forth.

The room was full of shadows, with only dim strands of sunlight entering between drapes and Venetian blinds. Sparse dust motes swam giddily in the yellow sun's shaft.

"When did you get here?" Al asked.

"Yesterday. What does—?"

"Why didn't we come together?"

"Because it didn't suit. Now, Al, will you please sit tight?"

"I wish I were tight."

"Al—"

"What am I supposed to wear? These clothes are dripping. I'll catch cold in here. I need a shower."

"Everything's taken care of," Noah said, with a trace of exasperation. "You live here, Al. You're Thomas Longren, remember? The house is staffed. Your wardrobe is ready. Good Lord, Al, you've been through this before. You know we take care of things."

"Whose joint is this?" Al asked.

"It's an ambassador's home, if you must know. Now, will you please just sit there and listen?"

They eyed each other. Noah suddenly turned away and stood with his back to Al. Al stared at the humped shoulders of his superior, his confidant. He knew very well Noah loved every minute of preparation for a job; he relished the meticulous details of explanation, and Al did admit Noah always knew what he was about. But he couldn't let go digging at the man. Noah was such a gob of glue. Al grinned.

Noah turned swiftly. "It had to be done this way," he said. "It's beyond your comprehension, of course, but we do things of necessity."

"Aye, aye."

"For your information, Al"—Noah's smooth baritone was faintly clipped—"there are two Princes. Two. Get it? A brother and a sister, both experienced Egyptologists. British Intelligence was not certain which they would send along to Cairo to meet you."

Rebecca Prince smiled at Al. "It's true," she said. "Richey caught an evil cold at the last minute, and I had to come."

"And who," Al asked, "who figured out the yellow rose angle?"

Noah Bain's face reddened slightly. "That's neither here nor there," he said quickly.

Al gave a short laugh. "Noah, you're a card."

"Smile when you say that," Noah said. "Now, please, listen, Al. Time is running out on us. We've got to move fast. I mean it."

"Meaning me?"

"You."

"Fire away, general."

Noah sighed again. His face became grim.

"Go ahead," Al said. "Get with it."

Again Noah sighed. He sat suddenly on a large white ottoman and leaned forward, his heavy shoulders hunching. "There was a man named Amos Robinson. Robinson was a noted English archaeologist, internationally famous as a historian. He was actually knighted, I believe, or something. . . ." He turned and lifted his eyebrows at Rebecca Prince.

"Supposed to be knighted," she said. "It never had a chance to come off."

"Anyway," Noah said, turning back to Al. "Robinson led an expedition to a site near the Giza pyramids, outside of Cairo. I suppose you've heard of the pyramids?"

"Put down your knife," Al said.

"Yes. Well, he dug up a city nobody knew existed."

"How'd he find it?"

"He was led to it from hieroglyphs on a strange tablet in a British museum, in London. It had never, until then, been deciphered."

"Noah, baby, I could listen much better after a cool shower and clean duds."

Noah ignored him. "Along with the buried city, the buildings of which were well preserved, Robinson unearthed a pyramid. It's supposed to date from the First Dynasty. An early Egyptian ruler, Kra Hotep, was entombed in the pyramid. It's damned interesting, Al, the whole thing."

"Sure."

"On the tablet, there were references to an Egyptian chemist, one Tre Henda, and mysterious signs alluded to an inner tomb, or vault."

"Ah. Now it comes out. A vault."

"Please, Al. Don't interrupt. This is important." Noah

tried to smile, but it was stiff. "John Koch, a Russian, born of German parents, from Coblenz, originally, was Amos Robinson's advisor. He was also an Egyptian scholar. They checked and discovered the vault, at the center of the pyramid. Now comes the bad part. Three men with the expedition, and Robinson, were to enter the vault on a certain day. Robinson had business in Cairo and he was late returning to the diggings. When he arrived, the buried city was deserted, the superstitious natives had run off. He entered the pyramid and found the bodies of his three friends. Dead."

"Neat," Al said.

Rebecca Prince said, "Of course, I know some of this."

"Yes," Noah said. "Anyway, Robinson checked further, and in the opened vault he discovered a roll of papyrus and an empty container of some kind. With Koch's help, Robinson deciphered the writing on the papyrus and he was horrified. The Demotic text was a formula for a completely revelatory nerve gas, Al. Immediately, Amos Robinson knew the container had held this gas, and when it was opened it had killed his friends. For centuries, Al, it had never broken down. A discovery in itself."

"Oh, boy—nerve gas. I'm getting the picture."

"You've seen nothing," Noah said. "In a minute you'll understand why all the hurry, and maybe you'll even understand the secrecy."

"I told you to put away the knife, Noah."

Noah grinned. "Okay, then. Autopsies were immediately performed on the bodies of Robinson's friends, and it was pretty clearly established that they were not actually dead when Robinson discovered them. Think of it, Al, Miss Prince. They had been embalmed while

still alive." Noah paused, scratched his high forehead, then folded blunt-fingered hands across his knees. "Horrible," he said abstractedly. "Well, of course, matters get worse. Robinson, the idiot—I shouldn't say that, but I can't help putting blame on the man for not considering more careful action—"

"What'd he do?" Al asked.

"He secretly manufactured the gas and experimented on animals. He found the gas to be very real. It's terrible. One-tenth part of one hundred-thousand, inhaled, completely incapacitated the victim. It's like nothing else known, Al."

"Yes, but—" Al commenced.

Noah held up a broad palm. "John Koch steps into it now. True to his Russian-born heritage, he spied on Robinson. Robinson was attempting to keep it all quiet, understand. Koch approached Robinson bluntly, and implored him to turn his discovery over to the Russian government. He damned well did more than implore, too. Robinson, in a struggle, killed John Koch with a gun."

"Make a hell of a good book," Al said.

"Robinson killed Koch, sure—but not before Koch sent a report to Intelligence Headquarters in Moscow, and not before he had a visit from an SIA agent who was playing footsie with the reds."

"Beautiful. The SIA."

"Yes. We have them, too, Al."

"Well don't look at me."

"Sorry. To get on, Robinson, after killing Koch, filled with despair, turned the gun on himself. But the day before Koch was killed, he'd told that Robinson put the papyrus scroll in a piece of statuary sculpted by a man in the Old Quarter of Cairo—Ali Hamid Barran."

"Well, okay," Al said. "It's thick enough, but so what?"

"Now we come to you, Al." Noah spread his hands, dropped the palms on his knees, and stood up quickly. He began pacing again, glancing first at Rebecca Prince, then at Al. "We've learned, Al, that the piece of statuary is in the British wing of the State Museum, right here in Cairo. Robinson presented it to the museum as one of his finds. Russia is after the ancient formula. So is Red China. The news leaked and leaked, Al. The Communist Chinese somehow learned of it, damn it." Noah turned on Al, his face stern. "This gas can completely cripple a continent in a matter of hours. It's devastating, frightening to even consider." He hesitated, then said, "Russia is bad enough, treacherous as they are. But the Red Chinese—volatile, desperate—no telling how soon they might resort to this weapon if it falls into their hands."

"How recent is this?" Al asked.

"It's recent," Noah told him.

"But what can we do?" Rebecca Prince's voice was hesitant.

Noah's tone was level, as stern as his expression. "Al's got to go to the State Museum, find and obtain the piece of statuary containing the papyrus, and get it to us—the SIA. The United States plans to destroy the formula. It's bad—it's rotten."

Al said nothing, wrapped in thought.

"Incidentally, Amos Robinson's wife Helen and their daughter live in Cairo. Their home is at Gizira."

"Where's that?"

"It's an island residential section."

"Noah!" Al said, brightening. "We've got to find what the statuary looks like, right?"

"We'll never lay hands on it otherwise, Al."

"Well, for hell's sake, then. We just ask the curator, or whatever he's called. Tell him we want to see the piece of statuary Amos Robinson gave the museum just before he died. Once we know its form, the rest is pie."

Noah sighed desultorily. "More like stew," he said. "Give me credit, Al. I checked with the museum first thing. It's lousy, but Robinson presented the museum with one hundred and thirty-three pieces just before he died, ninety-six of which were tomb statuary."

"Rats," Al said.

Noah was suddenly quiet. Al looked at him. Noah turned away and paced the length of the room. He stood with his back to Al, staring ostensibly at a large oil painting of what looked like the sun.

"Okay, dad," Al said. "What is it?"

Noah turned slowly. "There *is* something else, Al." His voice was gentle now. "I don't know exactly how to say it. You won't like it."

"We're not playing chess, Noah. Make your move."

Rebecca Prince's dark blue eyes were wide, her expression subtly contained. She was a little pale.

Noah said bluntly, "Word is out that both Russia and Red China have sent emissaries with orders to kill Al Mundy on sight."

III

Al took out a cigarette and lit it. He dropped the match in a large jade ashtray on an end table beside the couch. "This makes things quite pleasant."

"We knew it would come to this eventually," Noah said. "You're a threat to the working networks of both countries. You're a master thief, Al, and you've made inroads on their spoils. Deep inroads. You're not liked."

Rebecca Prince spoke up. "We get word in London about you all the time," she said. "Everybody stands in some awe of you, what you're able to do. The KGB, from reports, has a dossier on you that's as thick as a book, as dog-eared as a sexy thriller in Wormwood Scrubs. Your exploits are getting to be legendary, Mr. Mundy."

Noah's face was slightly flushed. "I'm sorry, Al."

"Hold on, corporal," Al said. "I haven't reached the end of my rope yet." He paused, sighed. "I'll say it isn't conducive to pleasant naps, though."

"Miss Prince," Noah said. "Al. Come with me. Something to show you."

Al stood up, and Miss Prince and he followed Noah into an adjoining room, with some chairs arranged against the wall, a film projector and screen set up. Noah went to the windows and closed the blinds, then returned to the table and started the projector. Al sat down, watching the screen. Miss Prince sat beside him.

She suddenly reached over, touched his hand, and her fingers gave his a slight squeeze. Her hand moved away. He could still faintly detect her perfume. Was it Verbena?

Light flickered on the screen, then Al saw varied shots of a tiny, very skinny, earnest-looking fellow in tight clothes. The man, rather Oriental in appearance, was shown entering and leaving buildings, seated in a large black sedan, buying a newspaper, gesticulating at another man on what looked like a pier beside a large schooner. In one shot he turned directly toward the camera and yelled something soundlessly, his face maniacal in its expression, the eyes blazing inner fury.

Noah's voice rose above the muted ticking of the projector. "That's Howard Silvester, Al. Real name, Ya Ling. He's a Red Chinese top secret agent, and he's a mean one. He's in Cairo right now." Noah's voice took on a curious edge. "Look at him carefully, be certain you can recognize him. He's a killer. He's a paranoid-schizophrenic, and extremely dangerous.

"Beautiful," Al said. His tone sounded facetious, but inside, his spirits had slumped. He mentally checked each physical attribute of the Chinese agent. He had heard of Silvester. He said nothing to Noah about this.

The scenes on the glistening screen changed. Several stills came into view, of a round-faced, plump-looking fellow, wreathed in smiles. There were close-ups and long shots. The man was a neat dresser.

"Leonid Kovotov," Noah said gruffly. "Russian head of the First Directorate of the State Security, KGB. Bad news. Kovotov has been sent personally to Egypt to conduct a search and obtain the papyrus scroll containing the formula. Kovotov is desperate. The security committee is dissatisfied with him. He's done nothing

spectacular for some time. He needs a feather in his cap. You're it, Al—you and the formula."

Abruptly the film came to an end, the screen flashed white. Noah shut off the projector.

The room was curiously silent.

Miss Prince said softly, "You're in a bad position." Noah was switching on the lights, and Miss Prince turned to him. "Can't you do something? Can't you order men to hunt down Kovotov and Silvester? Kill them? I know it's done."

"The less we alarm them," Noah said, "the better off we are. All we really want is that scroll. It's difficult and demanding. But that's the situation."

Al reached over and patted Miss Prince's arm. "Don't fret, darling. I've been through this before."

She looked at him, her large, dark blue eyes worried. "Don't forget," she said. "I'm with MI5. I'm trained, too. But this is alarming."

Al stood up. "What's this statuary look like, Noah?" He saw Noah tighten his lips. "Where'll I find it in the museum?"

"Al," Noah said. "We don't know where it is in the museum . . . and we have absolutely no idea what it looks like."

"Oh, great!" Anger touched Al like the forks of a whip. "Just what the hell do you expect of me, Noah? You might've done some groundwork. I've got to know what the statuary looks like, for God's sake. And how do you expect me to find it? You don't even know where it is." Al was disgusted. Everything was running to pattern. They expected too bloody much of him. Every time they wanted something, they put a brick wall up in front of him. He had been hired as a thief, released from prison on his promise to work exclusively

for the SIA. His promise. What shallow water that was, in their eyes. He was watched every moment, his movements checked and rechecked, his conversations actually taped. His home in Washington, D.C., was really one huge electronic listening and seeing device, all set up by the SIA. They trusted him as far as they could see him. He was giving them his life. He took chances for them and received hardly a nod of thanks. Noah Bain had come to expect too much of him. "For hell's sake, Noah, I'm not the Shadow. I don't have X-ray eyes. I'm human, will you consider that? The SIA is the largest organization of its kind in the world. And what do you do? You think, baby, that good old Al Mundy can work wonders."

"You do work wonders, Al," Noah said gently.

"Go to hell," Al said flatly.

Noah stood there. He looked hurt. He ran tense fingers across his thinning brown hair and tried to smile.

"Damn you," Al said, feeling sorry for the man, despite himself. He knew Noah was a pawn, too.

"I'm sorry," Noah said.

"Sorry," Al said bitterly. "Noah," he said. "I really don't see how I can do this. How much time do we have?"

"No time at all," Noah said, his voice still gentle. "Immediate action. We've got to beat the enemy."

Al's voice was smooth, silky. "When I worked for myself, Noah. I took time. Understand? Groundwork. How do you think I acquired my reputation? Why did you come to me? I'm not a slapdash worker, Noah. I've worked as long as six months just casing a place I expected to bomb."

"Bomb?" Miss Prince asked.

"Clean out," Al said. "Noah, it takes time. . . ."

Noah shrugged. "What do you want me to do, Al?"

Al turned and walked swiftly into the front room. He stood in the center of the room, trying to think.

Noah patted his shoulder. "You're an American archaeologist, Al, along with Rebecca Prince and myself. We're interested in Robinson's discovery of the lost city, the pyramid." Noah was still very gentle. He was ignoring how Al felt. Al knew the man was thrusting ahead, knowing he would win his point. "The site is guarded by the Egyptian government, Al. They lay claim to any findings. Two natives with rifles patrol the site, enlisted by Saida Makir."

"Who the devil's he?" Al asked, still not looking at Noah.

"Makir is Chief Inspector of the Cairo police."

Al's tone was brusque. "Where's my room? I want a shower, a change of clothes."

"I'll show you, Al." Noah looked relieved.

Al turned to Rebecca Prince. "Get ready," he said. "We're going to the Old Quarter of Cairo, pay a visit to Ali Hamid Barran, the guy who sculpted the statuary containing the scroll."

"But, Al," Noah said. "What good will that do?"

"Will you please show me my room?" Al asked.

Noah sighed. "I still don't see . . ."

Al grinned and placed his hands on Noah's hunched shoulders. "Baby," he said. "You're not paid to see. You're paid to explain. Now just leave it to me, huh?"

Noah smiled, more relief showing in his eyes. "All right, Al."

Al patted Noah's cheek. "Shower and clean threads?"

"Yes."

They started for the stairway. "I'd like a sandwich and a cold beer when I come down."

"I'll fix it myself," Noah told him.

Twenty minutes later, Al and Miss Prince sped toward Cairo's Old Quarter in a racy bronze sports car provided by the SIA. Al drove fast. He had consulted a map before leaving.

"They've got me by the curlies," Al said.

Rebecca Prince's face flushed lightly.

"Noah's a character," Al went on. "He comes up with the damnedest things. But, as I say, they've got me. They know I'll do what they ask." He paused. "Maybe someday I'll surprise 'em."

She said nothing.

"How come you're here, anyway?" Al asked.

"Many reasons. But most of all to authenticate the scroll, when and if you find it."

"How long have you studied Egypt?"

"My entire life, Al."

"You like working for Intelligence?"

"Most of the time it's a bore, really. But, times like this"—she smiled at him as he glanced toward her—"I like it. Really. I'm funny, I guess. But excitement does something to me." She flushed again. "You wouldn't understand."

"Wouldn't I?"

"I'm sorry. I suppose you do understand."

"Rebecca, honey, if you like excitement, I think I can promise it this go-around. I have a feeling, a very special feeling."

"You've got to be careful, Al."

He was silent then. They were passing into the Old Quarter. Minarets thrust above the ancient buildings. The streets were narrow, thronged with people, winding. Overhanging wrought iron balconies tipped pre-

curiously above the street. Bazaars, colorful and crowded, were everywhere.

"Wouldn't think there's a war on," Al said.

"How do you expect to find this man Barran?"

"Watch," Al said. "Everybody knows everybody down here." He stopped the car, got out, glanced back at Rebecca Prince. "Sit tight. Be right back."

He pushed his way through a crowd of onlookers toward a nearby street bazaar. Multicolored draperies were displayed, along with figurines, vases, bowls, beads, gleaming brassware, copper plates, baskets, stools, kettles and round pots. A witch-faced old Arab woman was hawking her wares behind a counter.

Al moved around the counter, under a crimson drapery, smiled at the old woman. "I'm—"

"Ah, American! You buy good things from me. I have plenty good things. Cheap."

"Wait," Al said. "I'm looking for Ali Hamid Barran's display. You know Barran?"

Wrinkled eyes flashed bitterly. "Pah! Barran. What you want heem for?"

Al loosened inside. She knew him, all right.

"I have some work for him," Al said.

The old woman picked up a brass plate, ornately worked. "You buy this?"

"I don't really want it."

"Then"—she shook her head, her eyes wily—"no Barran, meester."

"You drive a hard bargain."

"I am in business thirty-five year," she said. "I learn many things."

"Okay, give me the plate."

"It is a good plate. Two pounds, fifty piasters."

"Not worth it. One pound fifty."

The old woman shrugged, held out a trembling brown hand. Al paid her, took the plate. She smiled craftily. "It is worth twenty piasters," she said, and drifted off into a series of wild cackles.

"Where do I find Barran?"

She choked on her laughter, pointing off down the street. "*Hassana!* Right there. He is right next to me. See? His sign."

Al looked down the street. One building away there was another display of Egyptian ware. A large bannered sign, hung between two golden poles, in blues and yellows, read: ALI HAMID'S MYSTERIES OF EGYPT. Brightly colored draperies were wrapped about broad counters.

The old woman still cackled dryly, poking Al in the elbow with brittle fingers. "See? See?" she said.

"Thanks for everything," Al said.

With the brass plate beneath his arm, he moved to the curb, motioned to Rebecca Prince.

The girl slid beneath the car's wheel, drove over close to the sidewalk, and got out. Al handed her the brass plate. "A present, just for you."

"Well," she said, looking at it closely. "Thanks, awfully."

"Don't mention it."

She put it inside the car. Together, they approached Ali Hamid Barran's display.

A brown street urchin played with a large rubber monkey in front of the broad counter. Otherwise the area was forsaken. Barran was doing no business. A pretty Arab girl stood behind the counter, wearing a golden shawl, heavy with golden earrings. The counter was racked with handsome, ornate vases of every description, pottery, strange looking figurines, all painted

and lined with hieroglyphs, all appearing ancient. Some were cracked. Others were chipped, with entire parts missing. Small signs read: *Direct From The Tombs. See What the Pyramids Hold. Burial Urns.*

"Hello," Al said. "We're—"

The girl swiftly interrupted. "You have ze interest in artifacts? A king's breakfast bowl? Perhaps you have ze interest in marvelous vase? Inscribed by long dead artist? You have interest in—"

"We're trying to find Ali Hamid Barran," Al said.

Rebecca Prince was examining some of the things on the counter. She smiled mildly.

"Ah," the girl said, tossing her hair theatrically. "Ali Hamid? You know heem?"

"He'll be interested to see me."

The girl fell silent. She stared at Al for a long moment, her dark eyes lazy. Abruptly she turned and pointed. "Up ze stairs. At ze back. You find heem." She smiled then, showing large white teeth. She shrugged. "Ali Hamid is great artist. He works."

Al thanked the girl and, taking Rebecca Prince by the arm, moved over to the stairs in the two-story building.

They started up. It was dark, shadowed, chill. The stairs were of stone, the walls moist. Their footfalls echoed curiously.

"Barran's a fake artist," Rebecca Prince said softly.

"Fake?"

"Yes. All those vases, the stuff that's supposed to come from tombs? All fakes. I know about men like him. He makes all that junk himself. Sells it as real Egyptian antiquities. Plenty of people are taken in, I'm sure. He's very good. The best."

They had reached the landing. The strangely chill shadows engulfed them. Al could barely see. They moved down the straight hall, toward a large oaken door at the very end.

Sounds of a man singing reached them.

Al glanced at Rebecca, then knocked on the door.

The singing cut off abruptly.

A man shouted, *"Saeeda?"*

"Ali Hamid Barran?" Al called. "We've come to—"

"Ah! Come inside, then."

Al pushed the door open. He and Rebecca stepped inside. The room was a large chaos. Light from a broad window brightened the startling jumble. Pedestals with partially completed clay figures stood about. Broken pottery shards lay thick on the wooden floor. Work benches displaying hundreds of plates, vases, many smashed, and all in various stages of completion, stood about. There was a dank odor of clay, tempered by turpentine, paint. Al saw nothing of Ali Hamid Barran.

"Where's he hiding?" Rebecca whispered.

Al frowned.

Suddenly, in a far corner, yellow curtains parted, and Al realized it was a covered sleeping nook, a hidden bunk. An enormous man hove into view, came to his feet, lurching. He held an earthen jug in his right hand. Tall, built like a monstrous-shouldered giant, wearing loose black pants and a black smock, with an immense, curling black beard and long feathery hair, he roared at them in a grating bass voice.

"Americans! What the devil do you want?"

"Ali Hamid Barran?"

"What of it?"

"We've come to talk with you about Amos Robinson—"

Al did not have a chance to finish what he'd started saying. Barran gave a brutal roar and flung the earthen jug straight at Al's head, shouting, "Leave me in peace!"

IV

Al dodged quickly. The jug shattered against the wall behind him, and he immediately smelled alcohol. The wall was stained with liquid. Rebecca Prince's eyes widened and she moved toward the door.

Al and Ali Hamid Barran stared at each other. Barran's chest moved as he breathed.

Al was prepared for any move the man might make.

"Will you give me a minute?" Al said.

"Amos Robinson," Barran said. His voice cracked.

"Just a question or two," Al told the man.

"About Mr. Robinson?" Barran asked.

"Yes. It's about—"

Abruptly, Ali Hamid Barran began to weep. It was a tortured sobbing, ludicrous and somehow horrible in so large a man. His shoulders shook, and fat tears wormed down his cheeks, disappearing into the huge black beard. He turned and flung himself at the yellow-curtained bunk. The curtains tore, and he lay on a stained mattress, his shoulders bunching, the terrible sobs racking his entire body.

"I kill them!" he shouted, his voice muffled in the mattress. "I kill them!"

Al picked his way across the room and stood beside the bunk. He felt helpless. The man's sorrow was very real, but somehow frightening to see.

As quickly as it had come, the weeping ceased. Bar-

ran sat up with a swing of the powerful shoulders. His eyes were red-rimmed, but the black irises snapped.

"What is it?" he asked, growling the words.

"I hardly know where to begin," Al said.

"Begin, you jackass!"

Al sighed. "The feeling's mutual," he said.

Barran said, "Get with it, will you?" He was an Arab, and spoke well, but with a heavy accent. "I'm busy," he said. "Very, very busy."

"Some time before Robinson's death," Al said, "he had you make him a piece of statuary. Right?"

Barran blinked, and Al actually saw the lie forming in the man's mind. Barran slowly moved his head from side to side. "I know of no such statuary."

"Come on," Al said. "You made it for Robinson. I just want to know what it looked like, what form it took."

"I tell you," Barran said. "I made nothing for Robinson. True, he was my friend. The best friend, but I made no statuary for him. I made nothing for him."

The man's words regarding his friendship with the famed English archaeologist rang true. But the rest was a lie, and it was written in the Arab artist's eyes.

"Look," Al said. "Believe me. It's important. I can't tell you why. But if you want to help the memory of Amos Robinson, please loosen up, huh?"

"I am an extremely sensitive man," Barran said. "You're disturbing me. I won't be able to work for many days. It takes a long time to recover." He drew a breath. "Now, please go. Leave me alone. I have nothing to say." He sighed, deeply. "I made nothing for Mr. Robinson. Nothing. You understand?"

It was patent the man was lying, and quite nervous about it.

"Was it hollow?" Al asked.

"I asked you to leave," Barran said. "If you don't go immediately, I will throw you out." His voice rose as he finished speaking.

"We'd better go," Rebecca Prince said.

Barran's eyes swung to the girl, then back to Al.

Al knew he must find out what the statuary looked like. Barran obviously wasn't going to tell him, for some personal reason.

Al turned to Miss Prince. "Let's go," he said.

They left the room. At the door, Al glanced back at the Arab artist. Ali Hamid Barran stood there, watching them narrowly. Then he strode across the room and slammed the door.

In the street, Rebecca Prince looked at Al Mundy.

"What can we do now?" she asked.

"Damned if I know, darling."

"He knew something. It was obvious."

"He had a deep regard for Robinson," Al said. "Some bond we may never know anything about."

"But we've got to find what the statuary looked like."

"We'll run back to the house," Al said. "I want Helen Robinson's address on the island, in Gizira."

"You're going to see her?"

"We're both going," he said. "I like your company, Miss Prince."

She smiled at him, and they returned to the car. Street Arabs crowded thickly around the car, feeling the gleaming fenders. Al brandished his arms, and they moved a few paces away.

Moments later, they threaded slowly through the thronged, winding streets of the Old Quarter until they were on Helwan Street. Then they made good time back to Assurugiya.

As they drew up in front of the large house where Noah Bain waited, Al experienced a sense of frustration. He didn't like it. Time was of the essence. Everything moved slowly. How could he locate the statuary in the State Musuem, if he didn't even know what it looked like? He couldn't ask anyone about it. The SIA often left him high and dry with jobs like this. They expected too much of him. They thought he was a magician. And this was only the beginning.

Inside the house, Noah was disturbed.

"Al," he said, "this is your job, entirely. It's very strange, it seems to me, that you could get no information out of this Barran fellow."

"Noah, just relax."

"I can't relax," Noah rubbed his forehead. "Too much depends on this."

"I know that," Al told the SIA man. "And I'll do everything I can. Now will you please exercise a touch of that remarkable ingenuity of yours and call Helen Robinson, and tell her the archaeologist Thomas Longren is going to pay her a visit?"

"I can't do that, Al."

"You've got to do it, dad."

Noah sighed. "Is Miss Prince going along?"

"Yes."

Rebecca Prince had left them together and was somewhere upstairs. Noah shook his head. "Helen Robinson won't know a thing," he said. "You're standing still."

"Where's the booze?" Al asked. "Let's cut the draft. Just make that phone call, Noah."

"There's a bar in the other room." Noah pointed toward some maroon draperies. He was obviously perturbed as he moved over to an alcove, where a white

phone sat on a small mahogany shelf. "I still don't like it."

"Tell her I want to meet her," Al said. "Nothing more." He turned and pushed through the draperies as Noah began thumbing the telephone directory.

Al found the small but well-stocked bar, tossed ice in a glass, and filled it with Pernod. He sipped quietly. He heard Noah's careful voice, then, a moment later, the click as the phone was hung up. Noah burst into the room and stood looking at him, obviously agitated.

"What's the hook?" Al asked.

"Mrs. Robinson isn't at home. She won't return until early this evening. They're getting ready for some kind of party."

Al sipped his drink. "I see."

"You see? This is a blind, Al."

"A party?"

" 'Get-together,' the man said." Noah pressed his fists tightly against each other. "What do we do now?"

"We wait," Al said. "What else? Noah, quit being so urgent, will you?"

Noah let go a gust of air.

"I'll take care of everything," Al said. "Don't trouble your little dome."

The SIA head's lips were tight. "What was this Barran, the sculptor, like?"

"A case," Al said, finishing his drink, pouring some more with care.

"That's right," Noah said. "Get smashed."

"Maybe I will."

"Al, what do I have to do to impress on you the seriousness of this matter? Not only are they gunning for you, but they'll stop at nothing to find that piece of statuary before we do. They're hunting for it right now.

You know that. Yet you treat things as if the whole situation were a farce."

"It's hardly that, dad."

"Show a little concern."

"Noah, they're after me. *Me.* I'm damned conscious of that. Just because I don't run around tearing my hair, looking wild-eyed and aghast, doesn't mean I'm not concerned. You should know me by now."

Noah slowly shook his head. "Sometimes I think I'll never know you, Al."

"That's the fight. Be dramatic."

Rebecca Prince, looking more beautiful than before, came past the draperies and stood beside Noah. She wore a crimson kimono. Her dark blue-eyed gaze was inquisitive. Al felt like staring.

He quickly told her what had happened. "You want to catch a nap, go ahead. We've a slight wait."

"But . . . do we dare bust in on a party?"

"I'm an old hand at gate-crashing, darling."

"What should I wear?"

"Street clothes," Al said. "I want 'em to think we just dropped by. Something short and nifty."

Noah scowled and let go a sigh.

"Wear a yellow rose in your hatband," Al said, glancing at Noah.

Noah blinked solemnly.

Al said, "Noah, meant to ask you. I came empty-handed. I'll need certain equipment, if things go right."

"Everything's here." Noah's voice was gruff. "I'm familiar with what you may need. We've brought everything. Even your blessed pouch. Black nylon jumpsuit, everything."

"Break into my house?"

"I have a key, if you'll recall."

"Forgot. My life's not my own." Al grinned. "Very thoughtful of you. You know, baby, I should be the one to figure what I might need."

"It's been a rush job, Al."

Al nodded, finished his drink, walked past Noah. Rebecca Prince was faintly smiling. "Guess I'll check the good ambassador's library," Al said. "Find an interesting book."

Noah was highly perturbed. Al knew the man didn't know what to say. "How the devil can you read at a time like this?"

"Calm," Al said. "Calm, calm."

But once in his room upstairs with a heavy tome on Egyptian history, Al was anything but calm. He stretched out on the bed, lit a cigarette, and lay there trying to come up with something. Matters looked syrupy. He didn't like it. Once things were underway he detested waiting. As usual in a position like this, he felt trapped. The SIA had him nailed down and they kept tapping away with their heavy hammer. Time was, if a caper smelled brittle, he would take off on the first plane. Start something fresh. That's why he'd gone free for so long. That's how he had avoided harsh entanglements.

But the SIA was a different matter entirely. He had to do their bidding. And the hell of it was, he knew what this could mean to his country. To the world. *A cog,* he reflected. *I'm a cog. They're depending on me.* And he could see no answers. Barran had been fallow. Would the Robinson woman bring in a good harvest of information? He could see no other way. Damn it, things always hung on a hair. He was always finely tuned, stretched taut like a violin string. Never any relaxation. Oh, he gave the picture of a studied laziness, the uncaring playboy. But inside he was at war. Inside,

where things counted, he was always going full speed. How long could he last at this pace? How long before a well-placed slug from the enemy's gun caught him in the heart?

He closed his eyes and thought about the KGB, the Chinese Reds. Both countries had given orders to kill him on sight. They had actually sent people to perform the job. They were here in Cairo.

You're coming up in the world, he thought. *You have the same degree of vulnerability as a president, a king, a premier. Maybe more. Yes,* he thought. *More, really. Because you're out in it, and you're alone. You have only your wits. Pray that Mr. and Mrs. Mundy really did give you good wits.*

He put his cigarette in the black ash tray on the end table, folded his hands across the book, and lay there.

You are really alone, he thought. *Face it, Mundy.*

The ghost of a smile touched that lean, young face.

V

The Robinson house was in Osman Street, not far from the Aquarium Garden, near the Gizira Sporting Club, in Zamalik. The night was beautiful. It was still early, and the sky was shot with lavender traceries of the dying sun. Purple hues bathed rich homes behind well-manicured hedges or fine stone walls. Terraced lawns were like green carpets. Old trees hooded the section. Cars moved sedately on the streets, curiously subdued, as if trying not to cause interruption. Leaves rustled demurely in this section where even the flowers seemed to smell of money.

"There's the place," Rebecca Prince said. "My, it's big, isn't it? Really, back home it would be referred to as an estate."

"Yeah."

There were tall iron gates, a curved drive, a sense of particular seclusion. Al turned the bronze sports car in at the gates and drove slowly up the drive. Cars were lined in front of the house, gleaming paint jobs tokening concern with appearances. The drive was a long one, the house set well back among the trees.

The windows were all saffron-tinted. It was a large colonial-style home, with white pillars and an impressive entranceway.

"A bit frightening," Rebecca Prince said. "You think we dare?"

"We dare," Al said, parking the car beside an enormous black sedan.

"He must've been wealthy. Amos Robinson, I mean."

They walked toward the entrance. Rebecca Prince wore black this evening, a mini-frock, and high boots. A man in evening clothes stood on the broad veranda. He smiled and moved with them to the door.

"Your names, please?"

"Longren," Al said. "Thomas Longren."

"I don't believe . . ."

"I'd like to see Helen Robinson, if that's possible."

"I'm afraid, sir, there's a gathering. . . ."

"Would you please check with her?"

The man's mouth turned down. Tall, dignified, he frowned and seemed to be debating.

"Really," said Al. "You're amusing, I admit. But I must see Mrs. Robinson."

Rebecca Prince's eyes twinkled.

"You're American," the man said.

"Name of Longren. Yes. We've come a long way. I'm an archaeologist."

Tightening his lips, the man motioned for them to wait, and entered the front doors.

"Wow," Al said.

"You think she'll see you?"

"No reason why she shouldn't."

The door opened and a tall, thin, pale-faced woman stood there. She wore an evening dress of black, with what looked like very tiny diamonds woven into the cloth. She carried a drink in one hand, a wine glass. Al immediately realized she was just slightly, genteelly, potted.

"Mrs. Robinson?"

"Yes. I'm afraid I— Did he say Longren?"

"That's right. Awfully sorry to break in like this, but I haven't a lot of time. If I could just see you for a few moments."

"Well . . . and who is this young lady?"

"Miss Prince," Al said. "Rebecca Prince."

Helen Robinson stared at them owlishly, then took a sip of her drink. "Come in, come in," she said.

They entered. Al disliked the entire business, but there was nothing for it but to go ahead. The house was obviously full of guests. They overflowed into the hall.

"You say you're an archaeologist?"

"Yes. Miss Prince is a noted Egyptologist. In England, that is."

Helen Robinson suddenly looked teary. Again she sipped from her glass. "Come with me," she said. They started down the hall.

Abruptly a short, stocky man in uniform, with slick black hair and snapping black eyes, moved fast toward them. "Helen?" he said. "I can't find the Earl."

"Oh, my," Helen Robinson said. "Here, now. This is Thomas Longren. He's an archaeologist. Just like Amos. And this is Rebecca Prince, the Egyptologist."

The man smiled, staring at them.

"I'm very forgetful," Mrs. Robinson said. "Please, meet Chief Inspector Saida Makir of the Cairo police."

Makir's grip was plump and fierce. He was very young, very earnest.

Helen Robinson turned to Al. "I'm still in mourning, you see," she said haltingly. "It's just a little social gathering. All close friends. I feel so lonely. You're not interrupting, Mr. Longren. My husband—I—" She valiantly held back tears, taking another drink from her glass. She finished the drink. "Sherry," she said apolo-

getically. "I have to have something. I find sherry just right."

"Are you long in Cairo?" Makir asked Al.

"It all depends," Al told the Inspector.

"Look me up," the man said. "I'll show you around. Are your papers all in order?"

"Oh, yes."

Makir did not smile. "I could arrange matters, if they were not," he said. "Excuse, please. I must see the Earl. *Saeeda,* for the moment." He turned and moved rapidly off down the hall.

"What did you want to see me about?" Helen Robinson asked.

"Is there someplace where we won't be interrupted?"

"Follow me." She sailed off down the hall, trailing an aroma of sherry wine. Muted conversation came from a large room. They turned down another hallway, and Helen Robinson opened a door. "This will be fine."

The room was a large study. Probably it had been Amos Robinson's personal room. A good fifty feet long, with a fireplace, an enormous desk with a leather-covered top, various easy chairs, and books from floor to ceiling. The lighting was subdued.

At the doorway, Helen Robinson said, "Amos spent so much of his time here. It's only appropriate—"

"Mrs. Robinson?"

They turned. The man who had met them at the front entrance was calling to his mistress, walking rapidly toward them.

Al swallowed. Accompanying the man was Noah Bain, looking straight ahead, his eyes faintly troubled. Noah and the other fellow reached them.

The man said, "I'm sorry. This is Gregor Flanders, a

member of Mr. Longren's party. He was supposed to come with them, but he was detained."

Al recognized the name "Flanders" as an SIA cover that had been used before. He stared at Noah. Rebecca Prince's eyes looked startled.

"Hi, Tom," Noah said. "Sorry I didn't make it on time." He turned to Helen Robinson. "I hope you'll excuse this untimely intrusion, Mrs. Robinson. We've all earnestly desired to meet you." Noah was effusive. "Your husband's work meant so much to us, especially his late find."

"I hardly know what to say." Helen Robinson waved her man away, and he drifted off down the hall. "Let's just go into Amos' study and sit down."

They entered the book-lined room. As they selected chairs around the fireplace, Mrs. Robinson went to a nearby table where bottles stood, and poured herself some sherry from a decanter. "Would you care for a drink?" she asked. "I feel so helpless."

"Nothing, thanks," Noah said. "We don't really have a lot of time. But we did want to pay our respects. And there's one small question—"

"Amos was such a good man, a fine man," Mrs. Robinson said, drawing up a straight chair, staring into the naked grate of the cold-looking fireplace. She took a long sip of her wine, and a dribble missed her mouth, moved down her chin. She gave a little giggle and wiped it away with the back of her left hand. "Why did he have to die?" she asked.

"We all have to go sometime," Noah said. "But I agree—the circumstances—"

Al looked at Noah grimly.

Rebecca Prince's voice was eager. "His fame was far and wide, Mrs. Robinson. I've read all of his books."

"I'm filled with despair," Mrs. Robinson said.

"We won't keep you from your guests," Noah said. "But there is something we want to ask you. It's very important, I assure you. It may be a particular find, and, as you know, the archaeological world hates to miss out on anything." He chuckled, and Al gave him a cold glance. Noah ignored him.

"If I can be of help," Mrs. Robinson said.

"Miss Prince was sent from England specifically to inquire about this matter," Noah went on, his voice a cat's purr. Al marveled at the man. Noah spread his hands. "Just before he . . . passed away," the SIA man said carefully, "Amos Robinson made a discovery. It was a piece of statuary. This statuary was linked in some manner with a man, an Arab, Ali Hamid Barran. It's been hinted that the statuary is now in the State Museum, here in Cairo. According to reports, there was nothing in Amos Robinson's papers alluding to the statuary. We wonder if you could fill us in? We'd like to know what the statuary looks like. If possible, that is."

Mrs. Robinson looked blank. She took another sip of her sherry wine. She started to speak, but at that moment the study door was flung open, and a young girl, perhaps eighteen, entered. She was strikingly beautiful. She stood poised for a moment.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to intrude." Her pale blue eyes moved from person to person, then suddenly came to rest on Al. She stared boldly at him and abruptly smiled.

Al returned the smile.

The girl had long blonde hair, to below her shoulders. Her face was heart-shaped, with an attractive red-lipped mouth. The pale blue eyes, however, dominated the face. Al had never seen any eyes quite like them;

they were disturbing. There was something lazy and intensely provocative about those eyes. They remained fixed on him as she crossed the room in a quick glide. She wore a gold lamé micro-mini, sheer black stockings, and golden pirate shoes with gold buckles.

"Nesha," Mrs. Robinson said. She turned to the others. "This is Nesha, my daughter." She made introductions all around. The girl stood beside Al's chair now, with her hand on the chair back. One of her fingers touched the nape of Al's neck. He could hear her breathe. "Nesha was particularly close to my late husband."

"What's this all about, Mother?"

Helen Robinson quickly explained the purpose of their visit. Then she turned to Noah. "I'm terribly sorry, but I'm awfully afraid I'm unable to help you. I was never informed of any statuary. Amos said not one word about anything like that. You see, I was in London when he—when he died. I'd been gone three months." She paused. "I never should have left him alone for so long. But how was I to know?" Her eyes looked suddenly tragic. She took another long drink from her glass. Al could see she was on her way to being smashed good and proper if she kept it up.

"Then you're in Daddy's business," Nesha Robinson said. She had leaned down and was speaking directly to Al. Her eyes were very intense, and she was smiling at him. The finger probed the nape of his neck. She lowered herself to the arm of his chair, still smiling closely at him. "How interesting." Her voice was young and musical, and she was obviously brimming with energy. "And you're Thomas Longren? Funny, I never heard Daddy mention you. He always talked to me about his business. And he knew just everybody. Thomas Longren." She looked at the ceiling, and shook her head.

The long pale hair danced about her shoulders. "Nope. Never heard of you." She leaned close to Al, so her hip brushed his shoulder. She gave a little laugh. "But really—I'm awfully glad you've come."

Al didn't have to be struck across the head. He caught the drift. The young girl had taken a liking to him. Perhaps more than that. She was obviously a person who moved immediately on impulse.

Noah said, "You're positive you never heard Mr. Robinson mention any recent find—a piece of statuary?"

Nesha Robinson stared at Noah, her face impassive now.

"No. Never," Mrs. Robinson said.

Al felt Nesha Robinson's caressing finger increase its activity at the nape of his neck. He glanced at her. She was smiling down at him. He tried to grin, and knew it was lopsided. The girl was a small volcano.

Rebecca Prince stared at Al with curious eyes.

Al looked at Noah. The SIA head was unable to hide his discouragement. He was patently worried. It was revealed in the turn of his lips, the tightness of his gaze. Al knew so much depended on finding the statuary, and now they had no idea what it even looked like.

Noah suddenly stood up. "Well," he said. "We won't take up any more of your time. It's inappropriate for us to have appeared just now, anyway. Thoughtless. We'll let you return to your guests."

"Oh, but it's been marvelous!" Helen Robinson said. She made an attempt to rise from her chair. It failed. Al watched her take another stab at it. This time she came to her feet. She was rocky. Some of her wine spilled on the rug. She placed her foot quickly over the spot. "Nesha? Will you show them to the door?"

"Sorry, Mother. I have something I must do." Nesha

Robinson gave Al's neck a forceful tweak, stood up, smiled down at him again, lingeringly, then abruptly turned and left the room on the run.

"That girl," Helen Robinson said with a grimace. "She's wild. Just wild." She paused. "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm in a pitiful state." She gave a small hiccup, excused herself, blinked. "I'll take you to the door myself." Then she began to cry softly. She sank into her chair again, the wine glass tipped so the wine ran out across her knee, and down onto the rug.

Al quickly took the glass and set it on a table.

"We'll find our own way out," Noah said. He patted Helen Robinson's shoulder. "I wish there were something we could do."

"There's nothing anyone can do," Helen Robinson said.

They left her like that. In the hall, Al spotted the butler again. He quickly told him Mrs. Robinson needed his aid, and the man hurried away.

Outside, in the light from the gallery, they stood in the drive.

"How come?" Al said to Noah.

"This is hell," Noah said. "What do we do now?"

Al had nothing to say to that. "I mean, why did you come here?" he asked.

"I had a phone call. We have to work even faster than I thought. I came to hurry things. Now everything's hopeless." Noah tightened his lips. "The call came just after you left. It was Wallie Powers—"

"Wallie? He phoned—he took that chance? Suppose there's a Red wiretap on the ambassador's house?"

"You know Wallie better than that. He used a cover name, and everything was in code."

Wallie Powers was the other half of the SIA team

that had, in the beginning, approached Al in San Jobal Prison and bargained with him to work as a thief for the SIA. Powers had spent ten years in the New York City Police Department before signing up with the SIA. He was a practiced agent but extremely secretive, and always rather awed by Al Mundy. They had been on several vital cases together, when Noah was otherwise occupied.

"What's up?" Al asked.

"You've got to wind this thing up in Cairo as fast as you can, Al. And, believe me, it's got to be wound up right. Those are orders. Wallie said they're sitting tight on something else where you're needed. You've got to return to the States as quickly as possible. You and Wallie are going on an assignment together."

"Whoa," Al said. "One flaming thing at a time, dad."

"Sorry," Noah said. "That's how matters stand, Al. He said if you get killed here in Cairo, so far from home, they'll be extremely irked."

"Oh, wow." Al stared at the man.

"You're to get your hands on that scroll, and it has to be pronto."

"I like Wallie," Al said. "He's as smart as paint."

"As smart as paint?"

"Yeah. Raw umber."

Noah rubbed his forehead. "Now, the question is, what's our next move?"

"It's no good standing here," Rebecca Prince said.

They started toward their cars. Al turned at a soft, musical call from the gallery steps. It was Nesha Robinson, the gold lamé gleaming as she moved quickly toward them. She carried something in her hand.

She came up to Al, smiling. "Hello," she said.

"Hi."

"I have something you want."

Al's heart bumped in his chest.

Noah said, "What—?"

"This," Nesha said. Still smiling, she held up an eight-by-ten glossy print. The light from the gallery revealed the photograph of a crouching jackal, a piece of statuary.

"Where did you get this?" Al asked.

"I think it's what you want," Nesha said. "Daddy mailed it to me in London, just before he died. We always had secrets together." She paused, then said gently, "I'm very good at keeping secrets, you know. But in this instance, I think it only right I should show you. Daddy said he could not explain what this picture was all about. Just that I was to keep it always, and when I was old, I should make a will and pass it on to my children. He said something funny. He said it should never be lost, never misplaced. I don't really know what he meant. He said, 'All trace must not be lost.' " She paused again. "Anyway, you may borrow it, if you promise to return it to me."

Al took the photograph.

"Look on the back," Nesha said.

Al turned the photo over. Across the back, in large letters, was the name *Ali Hamid Barran.* He looked at the print itself again. The jackal statuary, according to this scale, was nearly two feet long.

Noah crowded next to Al. Al felt the man tremble, and he was breathing hard and fast.

"I sure want to thank you," Al said. "This is very important. I can't tell you how important."

"Mother knows nothing of this," Nesha said. "That's why she was unable to help you. Daddy said to tell her nothing concerning the photo."

Al had been examining the print closely. "We won't

need this," he said, handing it to her. "Thanks for showing it to us."

Noah's forehead wrinkled in a worried frown.

Nesha's voice was low. "You're not really archaeologists, are you?"

Al's gaze was baleful. "What makes you say that?"

"Oh, maybe you are. But you don't talk like one. I've been around diggers all my life. They're different somehow." She paused. "You're different, too."

"Al," Noah said gruffly. "We'd better leave now."

They thanked Nesha Robinson again and started across the drive. Al noticed a long black sedan parked directly behind his car, wedging it in such a fashion that he would find it impossible to back out. A low stone wall, surrounding a small rock garden, touched his front bumper.

Turning, he called back to Nesha Robinson. "Would you get that fellow, I guess he's the butler? A car's blocking my path."

Nesha smiled, obviously happy to help Al in any way. She ran inside the house, carrying the photograph. She reappeared almost immediately with the tall, grim-faced man in tow. Al explained the situation. The man selected a gleaming key from a handful, dropped the others into his pocket. "Be glad to move the car," he said, his mouth drawing down at the corners. "It's Miriam Featherall's. She's rather careless. It's not the first time." He stepped into the drive, then said, "If you'll give me your key, I'll bring the car around."

"Thanks," Al said, handing the man the key to the bronze sports car.

Nesha Robinson spoke up, smiling slyly: "What do you really want with that piece of statuary?"

Noah was quick. "It's rather special," he said. "It's

supposed to have been some sort of burial mascot to Kra Hotep, the Egyptian king. There are certain glyphs. It may tell us something. Of course, we're vitally interested in everything your father has found at Giza."

Nesha's questive gaze moved from Noah to Al. Al thought she ignored Rebecca Prince beautifully. To escape further probing, he turned and watched the man who had gone for the car. The fellow had already moved the black sedan. He opened the door to the bronze sports car, slipped beneath the wheel, slammed the door.

"Usually American's aren't so—" Nesha Robinson commenced, but the sound of her voice was cut off.

First Al saw a sheet of white flame envelope the bronze sports car. A rocking, shattering explosion thundered in the night, and the car seemed to come apart piece by awful piece, torn steel flung skyward, doors flying. He saw the man tumble half out of the car, screaming. Another explosion ripped at the car. It was a furnace of white fire. Then yellow flames and bellowing black smoke engulfed the scene. What remained of the car was fired as if by a torch. He saw the man burning, half in and half out of the driver's seat. He was covered with flames.

Al took three fast steps toward the burning car, then realized it was hopeless.

Shouts reached them from inside the house. People crowded at the entranceway.

A stocky man burst through the door, ran across the gallery and down the steps. It was Inspector Saida Makir, of the Cairo Police.

VI

Someone phoned the Cairo fire company. A truck was quickly on the scene, and men sprayed the guttering, seething mass of torn steel with foam. It was much too late. They wouldn't have been able to help even if they had been here at the first explosion. The car was an inferno of white heat. The man was burned and charred.

White jacketed ambulance attendants were finally able to move the man onto a stretcher. One shook his head as they covered the smoking, black body with a sheet. They placed him in the ambulance, slammed the doors, and roared off, their siren roofing the night.

"We've got to get out of here," Noah said to Al. "I don't want any questions."

"Too late," Al said with a grunt, pointing his chin at Saida Makir, who elbowed through crowded people toward them.

Helen Robinson stood on the gallery steps, one hand held to her mouth. She kept moving her head from side to side.

"It was your car?" Makir asked Al, his slick black hair glistening. He was stolid, but obviously eager.

"Yes."

"We can't imagine—" Noah said.

Makir interruped. "It was a bomb. No doubt about that. When he turned on the ignition—*poof!*"

"Yes," Al said.

"It might have been you," Makir said.

Al said nothing.

"You were very lucky. But poor Ingraham—" Makir tightened his lips. Then Makir was abrupt. "You have enemies?"

Noah's voice was soothing. "It's impossible," he said to the inspector. "It's got to be a mistake of some kind. I'm sure of it. We know of absolutely nobody who would want to do this."

"I abhor being so blunt," Makir said. "But have you no idea who might be happy at your death?"

Rebecca Prince broke in. "Could it be the war?" she asked. "There seem to be a number of dignitaries here at the house. They probably made a mistake, or maybe they just wanted to frighten everyone."

Al saw that Inspector Makir was disinclined to listen to Miss Prince's beliefs.

The over-neat, energetic policeman rocked on his heels, black eyes snapping. "A complete investigation is in order," he said briskly. "I'll probably want to see you again—all of you. Where are you residing?"

Noah gave the man their Assurugiya Street address.

"Ah," Makir said, scowling. "Please do not leave Cairo." With that admonition, he turned on his heel and strode over to the now smoldering remains of the car.

"Let's get out of here," Noah said.

He led them to his car. They stood beside the gleaming sedan and looked at each other. "Do you think?" Noah asked.

"No telling," Al said. "Got a flash?"

"In the glove compartment."

"You mean they might've rigged this car, too?" Miss Prince said.

Al went over the car carefully with the flashlight,

checking beneath the hood, under the car itself, the fenders, the dashboard, under the seats.

"It's clean," he said. "They just wanted me, Noah, baby. Apparently you're not vital."

Noah said nothing. He slipped beneath the wheel. Rebecca and Al got in, and they drove off. They were very silent, returning to Assurugiya Street.

Once back at the house, the reaction began to strike Al Mundy. If he'd had doubts before, he knew now, for certain, that somebody was out to kill him. It was an unpleasant sensation.

Noah was brusque, as always. "You've got to get over to the museum, immediately."

"Oh, Noah," Al said. "A night's sleep on that. The museum's closed and dark. Can you imagine me searching through a thousand exhibits for that one piece? It'd be hopeless, without having any idea where it is. Besides, I'll work better in the morning."

Noah bit his lip.

"We know it's in the British wing," Rebecca Prince said.

"Darling," Al said. "That museum is one of the largest in the world. We'll just have to wait, check it out tomorrow." He paused. "I don't know about you two, but I'm for a nightcap, and then the sack." He moved toward the bar in the other room.

Al felt curiously tired and not a little angry about what had happened. Again, as many times before, he marveled at his luck. But he could not get the Robinson butler, Ingraham, out of his mind. The man had never known what happened.

Al sipped a well-iced Pernod.

It was a devilish way to buy your way out of life.

He knew how careful he had to be now.

VII

The State Museum, in Cairo, was a sprawling edifice of stone. Two minor sphinxes guarded the immense entranceway, their eyes lidded. A strange silence seemed to inhabit the area, and once Noah and Al were inside this silence seemed even more pronounced. Their footsteps echoed in the vaulted entrance chamber.

It was just after nine o'clock, and the museum could only have been open a few minutes. Few sightseers were here as yet, but suddenly Noah grasped Al's elbow, pointing.

"That man."

"Where?"

"There!"

Al spotted a dark-suited figure vanishing through a room filled with glassed cabinets, over toward a doorway.

"It's Leonid Kovotov," Noah said. "I'm positive."

"Who?"

"The Russian agent. I'm sure it was."

"Relax, Noah. You're all worked up because of last night."

Noah rubbed his forehead. "Maybe you're right. What would he be doing here at this hour?"

But Al wasn't able to get the thought out of his mind. It might well have been the Russian agent. He would

have every reason to be looking over the museum, the same as they.

"Now is the time to make haste," Noah said. "The curator's name is Hermit El Roda—"

"An Egyptian?"

"Yes. I made an appointment with him. We're not a minute too early, either. Where's his office?"

They questioned a tall, uniformed Arab guard and were directed down a long hall toward the center rear of the huge structure. Stern-faced stone heads of obvious Egyptian design hung on the walls of the corridor. They seemed to be peering out across dim vistas of history. Glass-topped cabinets lined the hall, containing pottery shards and brass work of small design, all carefully labeled. Pieces of statuary stood about on pedestals. Again Al experienced that feeling of ancient desolation, of silence.

He said, "I guess it's best we do see this Roda. It might take us all day to locate the jackal statuary in this joint."

"We need all the time we can get," Noah said.

Al knew the SIA man was worried. He kept glancing at Al, frowning. He expected Al, too, to magnify his concern with some attributal words, to join him in his frustration. Al would have none of that. It was bad enough, knowing what he might have to do here at the museum. He did not like the looks of the place. Already he had made note of the fact that the State Museum was intricately wired with a highly sophisticated burglar alarm system. The place was a veritable trap. It was well guarded during the daytime, and he supposed it would be evil at night. Arabs were sensitive, flighty, given to abrupt action without thought. Al did not like it at all.

He was also searching for means of ingress. He saw none. He didn't like the idea of entering this building by the front doors. Besides, they would have locks that could cause consternation. And, once inside, it was highly probable that every case, every cabinet, every exhibit in this grand old building was wired into the system. Trip any one of them, and matters would turn desperate.

"Minute, Noah," Al said.

"What is it?"

Al said nothing. He moved to one of the long, glass-topped cases that paralleled the buff-colored walls. An enormous Egyptian tapestry hung above the case he stopped by. He checked the case. No doubt about it. Open it in any way and wild bells would ring here. Chances were, the museum even had its own guard mobilization group in case of a break-in. He meticulously went over the huge tapestry. Thick gold threads were entwined with silver; the thick cloth depicting old Egypt was obviously worth a small fortune. And, he satisfied himself, it was fixed into the alarm system.

He returned to Noah's side. "Oh, boy," he said. "This is going to be a job. Should have help. Don't know what the chances are."

"You don't have help," Noah said. "We're relying on you, Al, you alone, with your nimble fingers."

"My nimble fingers are kind of numb, Noah, baby."

Noah was incensed and irritated. He didn't want to admit the possibility of failure. "I don't want to discuss it, Al. You've got a job to do, and you're going to do it."

"Sure, general."

"Here's Roda's office."

They stood at the end of the long, shadowed hall, facing a large, rich, leather-faced door with a small

gleaming black-lettered brass plate at eye-level. It read: *Hermit El Roda. Chief Curator. No. 1.*

"You hint to him about what we wanted?" Al asked.

"No." Noah Bain was put out. It was seldom Al confessed to the likelihood of out-and-out difficulties in his work.

"Look, Noah," Al said. "I'll get your fool piece of statuary. I'll catch the cussed jackal. Okay?"

"You can call it 'fool,' knowing what you know?"

"Just an expression, old horse."

Noah turned away, opened the tall door, and they entered what was an outer office, done in dark wood paneling, elegantly furnished, with no windows, lit by brilliant neons that cast a blue glow over everything. A curvy but plain-faced Arab girl in a tight dark dress stood by an open drawer in front of a battery of blue-steel filing cabinets. She held a sheaf of papers.

"I don't like it," Al whispered.

Noah jerked his head, his gaze nasty.

"*Saeeda?*" the girl said, smiling and becoming suddenly rather pretty.

"Good morning, miss," Noah said. "We have an appointment with Mr. Roda."

"Ah. Yes. Then Mr. Gregor Flanders you mostly are, and the Mr. Thomas Longren, from America?"

"That's us, darling," Al said.

"Please to attend your God-given principles of patience," she said. "I have but to quietly notify the Hermit of your true emotions." Again she smiled and moved on small, earnest feet toward another leather-faced door at the end of the room beside a desk. At the door, she glanced back at Al, smiled again.

Al winked at her. She flushed and vanished through the doorway. Noah glanced at Al and shook his head.

Al grinned. The girl reappeared, stood beside the door, motioned to them.

"If you immediately please," she said. "The good Hermit will emotionally attend your desires. His presence awaits your democratic entrance with complex eagerness. If you will march in here, and vanquish your momentary desires, he will attempt to discourage your wonderment."

"We are bilaterally confused," Al said. "But we shall quickly avail ourselves of the evanescent pleasure of this emotionally golden hour. We enjoin you to take prayer at the convenience of your earliest. In the house of the absurd, conventional profiles emit snake whistles."

"Thank you," the girl said, smiling. "Thank you, thank you, sir."

"That's enough, Al," Noah said, as Al took another breath. "People will think you eat acid for breakfast."

"March on," Al said.

They passed through the doorway and the girl closed the door.

Hermit El Roda was a bird. He nodded at them from across a vast office, plushly carpeted in black. He sat behind a gigantic desk of highly polished ebony. The desk was a bleak expanse. It held nothing but a single silver pencil, directly before El Roda. Heavy draperies covered the windowless walls. Roda hunched in his chair, wearing a white linen suit, a black string tie, his narrow, beak-like face as pale as paper, his thin, blood-touched lips slightly parted. Tiny black seed-like eyes worked on Noah and Al with steady persistence. El Roda's jetty hair was an enormous cap that looked like a wig. He stood up, his shoulders still hunched like a vulture in a tree.

Nobody spoke. Al cleared his throat.

El Roda suddenly began chewing on something. He had obviously suspended the operation during their entrance. Now he nibbled and bit and swallowed.

"Melon pits," he said. "Would you care for some?"

"No thanks," Al said.

"Flanders and Longren," El Roda said. He leaned down, reached into what was supposedly an open drawer—Al couldn't see over the desktop—and popped something into his clamp-like mouth. Again he chewed. He chewed with the front teeth, his lips nibbling like a squirrel's. "Seems to me I've heard of you; then again, it seems to me I haven't." He had an accent, but his familiarity with English was apparent.

A tough cookie, Al thought wryly. A wily onion. He glanced at Noah. Noah's face was bland, and Al knew the SIA man was slightly frightened of the Egyptian.

"Come in," El Roda said. "Sit down, please."

They took comfortable leather chairs in front of the vast desk. El Roda sat quickly, hunched and chewing, his forehead a myriad of wrinkles. "Now, just what's the problem, gentlemen?"

"No problem," Noah said. "Just an interest in Amos Robinson's finds out at Giza. Thought we'd take a look."

"Oh. I thought it was something specific. You led me to believe over the phone that you have a problem."

Noah swallowed carefully. Al was watching him. "No problem, I assure you," Noah said. "But there is something. We've heard of a piece of statuary Robinson found at the diggings. It's in the form of a jackal, a crouching jackal—runs about a foot and a half long, or more. We'd like very much to see it, but we don't know where to look."

"Ah." El Roda sat there. He ceased chewing and stared at them. "Ah," he said again.

"You—you've heard of this jackal?" Noah asked.

El Roda hunched even more on his perch, reached into his drawer for more melon pits, popped them into his mouth. He began to chew again. He picked up the silver pencil, laid it gently down.

Al was disturbed. He did not like El Roda.

"Very curious," El Roda said. "Very odd. Very strange, I mean to say. Yes, indeed, I know of the jackal. There is only the one."

Al heard Noah sigh with relief. He wished the SIA man wouldn't be so obvious.

"But," El Roda said, "we have a problem. The jackal is no longer on exhibit—"

"But—why?" Noah interrupted.

El Roda's shoulders moved. "Efforts are being made to authenticate the piece, Mr. Flanders. There is strong doubt about that jackal. It amuses me to think Amos Robinson would try to put one over on us, but the chance is there. A sort of final laugh of departure, you might say. The man did have a sense of humor, and after consideration I can see that he might well do such a thing."

"Might we have a look?" Noah asked.

"I'm afraid not," El Roda said. "The jackal is safe in the walk-in—"

"The 'walk-in'?"

"The museum vault," El Roda said, motioning vaguely to the left. Al followed the movement, glancing at the drapery-covered wall. There was no sign of any vault. He tensed inside. Matters were thickening disagreeably.

"But," Noah said, "if we could just see the jackal?"

"I'm very sorry," El Roda said. "We couldn't do that."

"I don't see why not."

"It's crated, awaiting shipment to Beirut."

"I see."

"Terribly sorry, gentlemen. I see your hearts were set."

Al said, "When is it being shipped?"

"Tomorrow morning."

Noah's hands were knotted on the arms of his chair.

"Well, that's that," Al said. He stood quickly. "We won't take up any more of your time, Mr. Roda."

El Roda stood behind the desk, smiling. He apparently had a melon pit stuck in his teeth. He worked deviously on this, smiling, blinking those seed-like eyes.

"I'm truly sorry," El Roda said. "If there is anything else? I might be of help?"

"No," Al said.

Noah left his chair. He was curiously silent, and Al could understand why. They bade goodbye to El Roda and left the office. In the outer office, the girl was typing like a machine gun at the desk. She looked up and smiled at Al, her upper lip beaded with sweat.

Al said, "And farewell, merry heart, the gift of guiltless minds."

The girl shook her head slightly, still smiling.

Noah took Al's arm and they went out into the hall. "What's this about guiltless minds?"

"Fulke Greville," Al said. "Long before your time, O ancient one."

"What are we going to do, Al?"

"Do? What else? We're going to obtain the jackal, Noah, baby."

"But how? We haven't much time. It's crated and hidden away somewhere in a damned vault. We don't know where the vault is. We don't—"

"*I* know where the vault is," Al said.

Again Noah was relieved. He smiled shortly. "You do?"

"Yes, dad. Now, will you leave everything to me?"

Noah gave a dark sigh. "I'm worried, Al. Everything is falling to pieces. I'm plenty concerned about Leonid Kovotov. I'm certain I saw him here when we came in."

"Bet he's gone now," Al said. "Listen, you just take off, okay? See what you can find. I want to be left alone here for a while. Things to do. Dig?"

"Will you get the jackal?"

"Tonight, maybe—with luck."

"But how?"

"You're disturbing me, Noah."

"All right," Noah said. "I'm going to check around. I'll leave you the car." He handed Al the keys. "Better check the car before you drive it."

"They won't rig another bomb, Noah."

Noah was nervous and troubled. Al sympathized. He felt much the same, though he didn't reveal it to the SIA man. He appeared as urbane, as assured, as suave as always. His penetrating blue eyes were steady.

Al gave Noah a gentle shove. "So long, baby," he said.

He inquired of an Arab guard the way to the British wing of the museum. The Arab directed him, and Al hurried down another long, picturesque corridor. The museum was rapidly filling with clusters of sightseers now. This would destroy his chances to examine things closely. He knew he had to work fast. It troubled him, but the sense of urgency was a curious happiness, too. He worked well when under pressure. Meticulously dressed, in a light gray suit of contemporary cut, lean and eager, he appeared to be an intelligent-looking

young man, if faintly bemused, and studiously interested in the museum's Egyptian exhibits.

He passed through a throne room, enormous halls, a make-believe harem revealing the daily life of khedives and sultans. It would take a week to actually view the contents of this historical show. Alabaster walls, appealing mosaic work, elaborate *mihrabs,* or prayer niches, needled the senses. He saw mummy cases beautifully carved and painted in which a king's body was placed; and still larger cases, more ornate, in which mummy cases were contained. A sarcophagus, holding a mummy from a tomb in the Valley of the Kings lay in one of the larger rooms in the British wing. Exquisite jewelry was on show everywhere, and this made Al smile grimly, as he recalled old times.

He worked rapidly and was soon satisfied that he had an evil task on his hands. The high windows were wired into the intricate alarm system. All doors were locked, doubly, and dead bolted. He thought of the vault. It was a confounding proposition. He checked the passageways. He entered doors marked DO NOT ENTER and saw a network of metal stairways. Then, in a large room of crystal chandeliers and hundreds of hanging lamps, magnificent inlaid ivory plaques and exquisite tapestries, he saw the skylight.

He knew what he must do and it drew a deep sigh. A ruddy shame this all wasn't for personal benefit. Still, he couldn't prevent a steady fresh rocking of his heart, a pulse-quickening content. Al Mundy was in his element.

But, leaving the museum for his car, he knew luck would have to be on his side. It had to be tonight, and there were things to do. He frowned as he slid under the wheel of the right-hand drive English sedan.

Tackling this job alone was foolhardy, and maybe utterly impossible. He had never faced quite so intricate a proposition. The damned alarm system was the culminating factor. It was enough to make a good man weep.

Wringing the cruel thoughts in his mind, he left the museum grounds and headed downtown. He lit a cigarette, glanced in the rear view mirror from old habit, and saw the huge German blue sedan behind, and knew he had a tail. He turned right, for a quick check. The blue sedan followed, a car behind. He increased speed and turned left down an alley, then right with his foot on the floor. He took another right and found himself on Helwan. Traffic was thin. The blue sedan was a leech, coming up fast behind.

Buildings were few along here. To the left was a steep embankment over a low stone wall, fields. He shoved at the accelerator, checked the mirror again and experienced a light expansion in his chest. The blue German sedan bore down on him from behind with devilish speed. The other car looked enormous.

He tossed his cigarette out the window and cut directly in front of the blue sedan as it attempted to pass on the left. There was a bright fender kiss, a wicked scrape of metal. The wheel spun. He clenched his grip. His car sped to the right, and the blue sedan roared up on his left. Again he sped ahead and sliced to the left, glimpsing an unrecognizable face at the wheel, other grim faces staring. The blue sedan abruptly spun to the right and gushed ahead, coming in close. He was on the far left shoulder of the road now. The wheels thumped and bumped. He was doing nearly seventy. He turned and saw the blue sedan swerve viciously at him from the right; there was a screaming clash of steel, his steering wheel was torn from his grasp. The car leaped to

the left, crashed through the loose stone walls. The blue sedan rammed again and Al knew it was all over.

His car soared out off the embankment. He smashed his fist on the door release lever, pushed and jumped, still in mid-air. He caught a spinning glimpse of the German car skidding to a halt beside the wall.

He struck brutally on the steep muddy earth, and rolled.

He heard his car below as he jabbed his feet for a hold. The car was rolling, leaping end over end. He heard the grinding clash of steel. Quick silence dropped as he slid to a clutching halt beside a pile of stones. He glanced toward the road, up at the German car, and came to his feet. Black-suited men crouched beside open doors, holding guns.

Shots cut the sudden silence.

Al threw out his arms, flung himself backward, and sprawled half behind the stone pile. He lay perfectly still. The gunshots ceased. He did not move. It was his one chance. Let them think he was dead.

A quick shout. Car doors slammed. The engine roared.

Al Mundy did not move.

VIII

Al lay still. Then he carefully opened his eyes. High in the blazing sky, a formation of Egyptian MIG-21's roared ear-shatteringly past. He turned his head. Why had they left him here, without an examination? Then, as he glanced up at the road, he knew.

It was a long funeral procession, with police escort, the headlights bright on each car, the slowly moving big black hearse decorated with garlands of flowers, fenders glinting in the violent sunlight.

Very thin. Very thin, indeed.

He came to his feet and ran up the embankment. At the top, beside the ruined stone wall, he turned and glanced back at his wrecked car. It was totaled, lying on its side, smoking in damp grass.

The last of the funeral procession passed. Al started walking down the road in the direction of Cairo's business section. He did not even allow himself the pleasure of thought now. He knew what he had to do.

Two taxis passed him by before one stopped: a muddy-looking figure—the drivers were wary. He directed the cab to the nearest telegraph office, got out and sent a cable to Rome.

Soon they were again on Assurugiya Street.

He saw the car at the curb, but paid it no attention. Deep in thought, troubled, he opened the front gallery door.

Inspector Saida Makir and Noah stood in the hallway. Makir, hat in hand, black hair glistening, took one look at Al, threw his head back and said, "Ah!"

Shock touched Noah's face but immediately vanished.

"And where the devil have you been?" he asked.

Al stood there. The entire right side of his body was stained with crumbling black mud.

"I'm a mess," Al said, grinning. "Nothing to be alarmed about. A kid fell in that pond back of the State Museum, in the garden." Luckily he had seen the garden and the pond from the English wing. "Mama stood there squealing. I dove in."

"The pond is made of cement," the inspector said dryly.

"Yeah. That's right. But they're repairing one side. Mud everywhere."

They were not repairing the pond, he knew. It was unlikely that Makir would check.

Makir made a face. "We're particular about who, in the name of archaeology, comes to Egypt—especially to Cairo," he said. "I've just arrived and Mr. Flanders tells me your interests lie in Amos Robinson's finds. Is this true?"

Al smiled. "Quite true, Inspector."

"What was your reason for going to the Robinson home last night?"

Al sighed. He started to speak but the door chimes sounded behind him. He turned quickly, opened the door. Nesha Robinson and her mother stood there. Nesha, wearing red and gold, was smiling. She winked brightly at Al. Helen Robinson, entirely in black, very pale under a thin veil, looked worried.

"Hi, there," Al said.

Inspector Makir made a small, grim sound.

"May we come in?" Nesha asked.

"Indeed," Al said, motioning them into the hall. He closed the door, leaned against it, and glanced at Noah.

The SIA man's lips were tense, his eyes dull.

Nesha and her mother greeted Saida Makir. Nesha looked rather sullen at sight of the inspector.

Saida Makir was abrupt, leaving no doubt that he was dissatisfied with Mr. Flanders and Mr. Longren. "I'll leave," he said. "I had no idea you were receiving guests. But"—he paused, his chin out, as he faced Al—"I will want to talk with you again. There are some unanswered questions. I'm concerned about the bombing of your car. I'm concerned about your interests. Let's say that I'm quite concerned. You come to Cairo. Already a man is dead." Inspector Makir moved his head from side to side, dampened his lips with a quick tongue. "I'll say it again. Do not leave Cairo."

Noah gave a small self-conscious laugh.

Al said, "We have no intention of leaving Cairo, Inspector. The fact is, I like it so well, I may even move here. How about that?"

Makir's lips revealed a white ring of displeasure. He went to the door, bowed bleakly to the Robinson women, and left.

Again Al looked at Noah. Noah ignored him and moved toward Helen Robinson. "I'd like to apologize for last night," Noah said. "It wasn't the happiest—"

"Please," Helen Robinson said.

"Will you have a drink? We've some excellent sherry."

Nesha was motioning to Al. She moved quickly toward the large living room, quirking her finger. He tagged along. Noah and Helen Robinson walked slowly after them. Nesha looked through the drapes into the

room beyond, and again motioned to Al. When he stepped close to her she tugged at his arm.

In the other room, they stood by the bar. "You're all over mud!"

"Yeah. Fell in the drink."

"I wouldn't doubt *anything* you'd do."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

There was something pixie-like in Nesha's eyes.

"I looked you up."

Al pinched the bridge of his nose.

"You're fifty-six years old," Nesha said, "and you died two years ago in Albuquerque, New Mexico. A rock ledge fell on you in the Jemez Mountains while you were investigating prehistoric caves."

Damn the SIA! Would they never learn not to use the names of the deceased?

"Oh, yes," Al said. "Pretty young for fifty-six, and a curious exhibition of the dead."

"You're extremely naughty."

"That was my father," Al said. "I'm the son. Same name, same earnest pursuits. He taught me everything I know. Of course, I went to Yale—"

Rebecca Prince appeared in the doorway at the end of the room and stood staring at Nesha and Al. Rebecca looked startlingly attractive in a bright green frock.

"And you," Nesha said to Rebecca. "You're for real, Miss Prince. I looked you up, too, and you really are an English Egyptologist."

"Well," Rebecca said. "You're cute, too."

"I'm Amos Robinson's daughter," the blonde girl said with a touch of naïvity. "I don't have to apologize."

Rebecca, smiling at Nesha, walked past and disappeared into the living room.

"There is absolutely no mention of a son," Nesha said. "None at all."

"I'm quite real, I assure you," Al said. "Here, touch me and find out."

Noah's voice was tinged with warning around the edges, loud from the other room. "Tom? Could you come here a moment?"

Nesha put her finger to her lips and said, "I'll never tell, but you are a fibber, aren't you?"

In the living room, Helen Robinson stood facing Noah, the veil drawn back across her pale face. She looked extremely nervous. Rebecca Prince sat on the arm of a nearby chair. She made a face at Al.

"It was I who wanted to see you," Helen Robinson said.

"Oh, Mother," Nesha Robinson broke in. "Let them be, won't you? It's their business. You shouldn't poke your nose in."

"I'm afraid we haven't much time," Al said. "We have an appointment, you see." He glanced at Noah. The SIA man was frowning questioningly. "Maybe we could make a date for later?"

"I must say what I have to say," Helen Robinson said. "I'm asking you to forget about whatever you came for. It can only bring harm to you, just as it did to my poor husband." She paused, made an ineffectual gesture, her mouth drawn. "Amos was very concerned about something. He was frightened. It was something he had discovered. I have the feeling you know more than you say." She threw up a trembling hand. "Don't tell me. I don't want to know." Her voice became strident. "I just don't want anybody else hurt. Amos killed himself because of it. He—he murdered a man. Death lies among those pyramids for those who probe too

deeply into the ancient mysteries." She paused, her lips grim. "Please, leave Cairo—go home." She ceased, then turned quickly to Nesha. "Come," she said. "We'll leave now. I've said what I came to say, and it's all I can do." She made an effort to smile. "Please come to see me. Let me know."

Al and Noah walked with them to the door. Nesha was obviously reluctant to leave, but her mother insisted.

The girl whispered an aside to Al: "I'll see *you* again," and winked slyly at him.

Noah closed the door as they left, and Al immediately said, "Noah, I've got to have another car. Can you arrange?"

"What happened?"

Al told him about the fracas on the Helwan road. Anxiety spread across Noah's face. "You need a car?"

"I'm going to pay Ali Hamid Barran another call, and I've got to move fast. That museum's wicked, Noah. There are preparations. And"—he spread his hands, his eyes lidded—"I cabled my father in Rome. He'll be here this afternoon. I need his help. Another—"

"Your father?"

"Yeah, baby. I figured two would be better than one on this caper."

"You had no right, Al. Not without consulting me first. Alister Mundy is not with the SIA. We can't account for him."

"He's helped before. You know that."

"You could at least have asked me."

"Noah, get off it, will you? Can you get another car?"

"They might have killed you."

"Oh, beautiful. Listen, I asked you a question."

"Why do you have to see Barran again?"

"I'm going to face him with the fact that we know about the jackal. I'm hoping he'll have a mold, or maybe he'll even have another copy of it on hand. A sculptor usually makes a couple. I want a copy, if I can get it, to put in the museum vault. It's better that way. As it is, there'll be repercussions."

Noah grunted. "I suppose there's nothing I can do. Yes, I can get another car. Our man in Cairo arranged for the two we had. God. Two cars gone already. I'll get in touch with him."

"It has to be within the hour. Right now," Al said. "There's not a bunch of time, Noah."

Noah moved to the phone. Rebecca Prince was still perched on the arm of the chair in the living room. She said nothing. Al turned and headed for his room. He needed fresh clothes. He knew he needed a lot of things that he wouldn't get. Two weeks in Rio. Plenty of peaceful time. Cairo was already a contamination, and he sensed lurking danger at every turn. It was worse than the usual assignment. Too much was going on behind the scenes. He felt abandoned.

He undressed and stretched out on the bed with a cigarette. He could not relax. He got up again, washed, and dressed in a light tan gabardine suit with an Edwardian jacket. He felt a touch better.

Barran *had* to be receptive. He needed that statuary to replace the one in the museum vault.

Downstairs, Noah faced him. "Hadn't you better make plans for tonight, instead of seeing Barran? It'll take too much time, Al."

"Dad," Al said, "you'll have to leave things to me. I know what I've got to do. The car?"

"It should be here by now." Noah was fretful. He

kept dry-washing his hands, pacing the room. "Will you be able to get the statuary—at the museum?"

Al knew that if he told Noah the real situation at the museum—what he had to do—the man would be even more worried than he was. "Sure, old horse," he said. "Wait—I hear a car—" He moved quickly to a front window. "A guy's left a car, but he's walking off down the street."

"That's right," Noah said. "He isn't going to stop by. Another agent will pick him up."

Al continued watching the man out the window. A car drew up swiftly. The man got in, and the car vanished off down the tree-lined street.

Rebecca Prince stood over by the entranceway to the room. "Shall I come with you?"

"Nope. Got to make this trip alone."

Noah's voice was gentle. "Be careful, Al, will you?"

Al flapped his hand at Noah and was gone.

Bless the good old SIA. The car was a beauty, a sleek two-door sedan, in metallic gray. It smelled new, but Al knew the engine would be thoroughly broken in, as well as reworked for speed, as were all SIA machines. He whisked off down the street with a backward glance at the house. He glimpsed Noah's face at the front windows and knew those usually bland eyes were troubled.

Poor Noah. He carried a load on his back.

Ten minutes later he was winding through the tortuous streets in the Old Quarter of Cairo. He drove slowly, using the horn to clear the way of thronging pedestrians.

The color, the near savage picturesquesness of the Old Quarter got to him. He wished he had nothing on his mind and was free to wander among the old bazaars. Especially with something pretty and attentive

on his arm. No chance. He quickly drew to the curb in front of Ali Hamid Barran's Egyptian display.

He got out of the car, slammed the door, and walked over by the colorful counter. There was no sign of the giant Arab artist. No one was attending the display. Two plainly dressed women were picking among the smaller vases, exclaiming to each other. The street urchin was still playing with the rubber monkey at a corner of the display, half beneath a flowing crimson tapestry. One of the legs had broken off the monkey.

Al moved up the crowded sidewalk and entered the door in the building where Barran lived. It was very quiet as he went slowly up the dank stone stairs. It felt damper than he recalled. The walls were sweating. There was no sound except for the scrape of his soles against the gritty, worn stone.

He came down the shadowed hall, moving toward the large oaken door. As he reached the door, he saw it was partially open. A breath of turpentine and wet clay emanated from the artist's quarters.

Al knocked on the door, and it swung farther open.

No answer. He knocked again and called, "Barran?"

Still no answer.

He pushed the door and it swung wide.

If the place had been chaos before, it now looked as if lightning had struck. Everything in sight was smashed. Tables were overturned. Once beautiful figurines lay shattered on the floor. All the pedestals lay on their sides. Gobs of clay had been squashed with trampling feet.

Then he saw a foot, a black leg, over near the yellow-curtained bunk. He moved quickly across the room. . . . A sad sight, a sight that jarred, a sight to remember.

Ali Hamid Barran lay on his back, one arm thrown

over his head, the black smock torn and rumpled. One knee was bent, the other leg caught beneath the body in a cramped, ungainly position. The eyes were open, staring rigidly at the mottled ceiling, peculiarly glazed. The tremendous black beard pointed upward.

Ali Hamid's throat had been cut, and he was quite dead.

Al knelt beside the body, touched the dead man's cheek. The flesh was still warm, and sweat showed on Barran's broad brow. He had been killed only moments ago.

Al stood up, turned and looked straight into a pair of slanting, shiny black eyes. Three men stood by the door. They were all Chinese. One of them held a large automatic pointed straight at his chest.

"Please," the man with the gun said. "Please, if you do not move, we much appreciate, Alexander Mundy."

IX

Al did not hesitate for an instant. An overturned table lay to the right, near the workbench that ran along the wall. He whirled and dove flat to the floor, immediately scrambled on hands and knees to the far edge of the table, came halfway to his feet, intending to leap at the gunman. A savage wildness was inside him.

Barran's studio became a circus ring. The table was snatched away from in front of him, and all he could see was flying bodies. Somebody tackled his legs and he looked up, tried to reach out—a grim face leaned, an arm swung. He saw the sap descending, but was unable to ward off the violent blow. The sap cracked viciously against his skull. He sagged to the floor, white pain lancing across his forehead. He was numb. He could not move. He willed his arms, his legs, to fight out. He lay there, wooden, the pain thrusting into his vitals now. He wanted to vomit. He curled over upon himself, fighting it, gagging.

Again the sap struck, and he heard strange admonitions, whispered shouts. Again the bright white pain drove through him. His skull seemed to crack wide open.

"We must question him.

"Yes."

"On your feet!"

He lay listless, the pain a wild havoc.

"Get to your feet!"

He groaned, opened his eyes, and saw the calm, almost serene face leaning above him. Strong hands grasped his arms, pulling at him. He tried to bend a foot beneath his body, to come upward. His leg buckled.

"You struck too hard, Jimmy."

"Get the hell on your feet, Mundy!"

The room was spinning. Again he felt sick to the stomach and could barely control it. But his vision was clearing now. There was only the pain, streaming down his neck, into his shoulders.

Abruptly he was lifted brutally, set partially on his feet. He tried to stand, to see who these men were. Everything was still faintly blurred. He couldn't get enough breath. Was it like this when your heart went out?

He tried to fight, aiming a swing at the nearest dark figure. His arm seemed to work in slow motion, and one of them laughed in a scratchy giggle.

"He's a clown."

"He's still asleep."

He felt strength returning to his legs. They still held him up, propped against the workbench. Something kept prodding at his chest. He looked down. It was the automatic, a .45, looking huge and ungainly in a small, yellowish hand.

"He is okay all right now."

"To the door, Mundy."

They pushed and, still dazed, he stumbled toward the door. In the doorway itself, he realized brightly that they had him. He knew he had to get away somehow—any way possible. He gave a savage lurch and grabbed for the automatic. He missed.

"Don't kill him!"

"We may have to."

Steel-like fingers twisted on his arms, shoved him out into the hall.

"The cellar way, Jimmy."

"He will like it," the one called Jimmy said.

Al was still dazed, his legs weak. The crack on the head had been a bad one. He felt certain these were Howard Silvester's men, Ya Ling's, the Chinese agent's. But as far as he could make out, Ling wasn't here. Jimmy seemed to be head man.

He tried to get a look at Jimmy as they pushed and thrust him on down the hall, moving fast. He gave a sharp twist and faced the man the others had addressed.

"What are you trying to do?" he said, his voice thick.

"You will see," Jimmy said.

He was a plump-faced, knobby-fingered fellow of medium height. His face was strangely pleasant looking, even though he did not smile. There was something benign about that face, but then Al saw what he was looking for in the eyes. The eyes gave it away. Jimmy wore a loose-fitting navy blue suit, a bright red tie. He blinked at Al.

"We're taking you to see somebody, Mundy. You'll enjoy it." At these words, Jimmy broke into barking laughter, his Adam's apple working in his throat.

Al turned to the other two men. They looked like twins, crisp and neat in dark suits, with Panama hats. The brim on one of the hats was broken, and flapped over the man's steady, dark eye. It gave Al momentary pleasure to consider he might have broken the hat in the struggle. He did not like this thought. It was inconsequential, and he realized he was still bad off from the hit on the head.

"Move it," Jimmy said.

He could see no way to escape. Jimmy held the automatic, and he was certain the others also had guns. There was only the one thought—that they seemed to want him alive. For how long, he didn't know.

They reached the stairs and started down. He slipped and nearly fell, but again the steel-like fingers grabbed at his arm, jerked him erect.

At the bottom of the stairs, they turned directly to the right, along a narrow hallway that smelled evilly of garbage and many meals.

They were heading toward an open doorway, revealing daylight; instead, they made a stop at a door. One of the men opened the door. Darkness. He switched on a dim yellow light.

"Downstairs," Jimmy said. "Couldn't you think for yourself, Al Mundy?"

They went down the wooden stairs, into a cellarway and along a heavily shadowed passage. One of the men came up with a pocket flashlight. It threw a pale, watery gleam on sweating stone walls. The passageway was the narrowest Al had ever been in. They had to walk Indian fashion, one man in the lead, then Al, then Jimmy, and the other man bringing up the rear.

Al knew they were beneath the streets now. The passageway slanted downward, then up again. It leveled out, and they approached a door.

Daylight again.

"Cross here," Jimmy said. He prodded Al with the muzzle of the .45. They moved across a small streetway, and then between two parallel stone walls. An opening in the narrow slit led to the left.

They went through the opening, and were in a small courtyard, centered with a stone basin, a statue of

Cupid spitting water from cherubic lips, bow cocked, tresses flowing.

Jimmy reached out as they passed Cupid and patted the cement statue's behind. "Don't you wish you were his size again, Al Mundy?"

Al saw a gateway to the right, leading out into a narrow street, beyond the walls. But they were approaching the three-storied side of a stone house. There was a small porch at the rear. What windows Al could see were barred, with dirty panes behind the bars.

"Up on the porch," Jimmy said.

One of them opened the door. They crossed the narrow porch. A garbage can, overflowing with damp, paper-wrapped parcels, stood in one corner. They entered the house, coming into a kitchen, and Al smelled the overpowering odor of boiled cabbage. An enormous vat stood smoking on the stove.

"Ah," one of the men said. "Cabbage rolls."

"I spit," Jimmy said. "Arabs!"

"Sit down," the man with the broken hat said to Al, pointing to a chair.

Al sat down, and looked at Jimmy.

Jimmy called out, "Howard?"

There was no answer.

"Let's put him in the cellar, where we're supposed to," the one with the broken Panama hat said.

Jimmy said, "Up."

Al got up. Jimmy took hold of his arm. Al shook the hand off, staring at the man. Jimmy motioned to a doorway, smiling now, smiling with his eyes, his mouth, his entire face.

Jimmy reached around Al and opened the door. Stairs led downward into a brightly lighted cellar. They went down the stairs. There was a damp, stale odor.

Al saw the cell. He saw the barred door, and the empty, cement-walled room, with the bare bulb dangling from the paint-freckled ceiling.

"Inside," Jimmy said.

Al looked at him. "Listen," he said. "What's all this about? Can't we talk?"

Now Jimmy laughed in his throat. It sounded like coughing. "You'll talk, yes. We agree to that."

"What the devil do you want?"

"I'll tell you this much, Alexander Mundy: you'll talk, whether you want to or not. And then we're going to kill you. We'll leave you right here—in there, in that room. Now"—Jimmy gave him a shove, and Al staggered into the small, square, stone-walled room—"get in there and sit on the floor."

"It looks dirty," Al said. "I don't want to sit on the floor. I'll stand."

"Sit on the floor," Jimmy said. He was no longer smiling. He looked as he had when Al first caught a glimpse of him. The eyes were nasty.

"Okay," Al said.

He squatted down against the wall, looking up at Jimmy. Jimmy started to close the barred door, but turned as he heard footsteps on the cellar stairs.

Al stood up again. Jimmy said, "Howard?"

"Yes," a man said.

Al waited as whoever it was crossed the cellar floor. It would be Howard Silvester, probably.

The man said, "You can go, Jimmy. Close the door and tell Denny to come down. I want him to stand guard here. I've some important matters to take care of before I get to business with our man here."

Silvester came into view then. Al was over beside the door, waiting. He leaned against the door, beside

the lock, and palmed a thin plastic card from his pocket, holding it against the lock, hidden, close to the jamb. Jimmy swung the door closed, and Al took hold of the bars and pulled the door tight, holding it that way. The bolt gave a *snick;* Al continued to stand there, holding the door.

"Go sit down," Jimmy said.

"The floor's damp," Al said, staring at Silvester. "I'd rather stand."

"Let him do as he wishes," Silvester said.

They regarded each other through the bars. Jimmy went away up the stairs, humming to himself. He glanced back toward Al from halfway up the stairs, grinning.

Silvester said nothing. He and Al looked at each other, and gradually a small smile crept across the Chinese face. Silvester was a short stick of a man, wrapped tightly in a dark blue pin-striped suit. He had a narrow head that bulged over the eyes, with high, bunched, but neatly brushed black hair. The cheekbones in that Oriental face were so prominent they seemed to nearly protrude through the saffron skin. The cheeks, below the cheekbones, were sunken as if Silvester were sucking them in forcefully. His mouth held that curious shape, too. But now he was smiling, and the mouth only altered a little. His eyes were like glistening buttons, the entire eye swimming in what must have been ever-present tears. Two white teeth showed between the strangely crimson lips.

"We meet," Silvester said. His voice was high-pitched, but from the throat, which gave it a wet, hoarse sound, like metal rasping. "I've often wondered if this would ever take place."

"What do you want of me?" Al asked.

A man was coming down the stairs into the cellar. This would be Denny. He came across the floor. Silvester gave him a glance. So did Al. Al had not seen him before. He had a head like a melon and was wearing a dark red sweater. His face was drenched with perspiration.

"What do you want of me?" Al asked again.

"I understand you are very tough," Silvester said.

Al said nothing.

"Aren't you tough, man? Anyway, we're going to ask you some questions." Silvester rubbed his nose with his palm, then scratched it with long fingernails that were very clean and gleaming with thick, clear lacquer. The eyes had suddenly reversed themselves, and were looking inward. Something inside his own mind amused Silvester. He closed his eyes, standing there, scratching his nose, and his lips curled up at the corners.

The man was insane. Al knew this now. Noah had been right.

With the eyes still closed, Silvester moved his hand down to his side, then said in a monotonous voice, "We're going to torture you, Mundy. Have you heard of the Chinese way? Have you heard about how we pull out fingernails, slice off eyelids, slit nostrils?"

Al said nothing.

Silvester's eyes still remained closed. "It's all too true, you know," the man said. "But it's no fair description of what we can really do. Can you possibly imagine what could actually be accomplished with torture? The satisfaction of absolutely knowing the victim will discuss whatever we wish him to discuss? Oh, no—hardly the simple way, Mundy. Hardly a fingernail pulling. That's for babies. Ah, we do it, yes. But for you, I've reserved something special. Dream upon it, will you."

Silvester opened his eyes. They were swimming in the ubiquitous tears. He held up one hand, and the long fingers trembled. "You are really somebody," the Chinese agent said. "You are an experienced thief. The SIA people, they regard you highly. We know all about that. We know how good you are. And you know, too, what we wish to know. Now." He paused at length, blinking slowly, holding the trembling fingers up in front of his chest. "You obviously have a good imagination. Then imagine all the subtlest type of torture possible. Dream on it. Think what we can do to you." Again he paused, then said, "And we will."

He turned abruptly toward Denny, the sweatered man.

"You have a cold, Denny?" Silvester asked.

Denny nodded, sniffling.

"You have a gun?"

"Yes."

"Use it on his legs if he tries anything. But do not kill him unless you absolutely have to." Silvester turned back to Al. "We will kill you," he said. "But that will come later. After you've told us what we want to know."

"I see," Al said. "And you expect me to crash over this whole freaked-out situation. That it?"

Silvester turned and started across the cellar floor. "Watch him good, Denny."

"I forgot my nose drops," Denny said.

Silvester was already on the stairs. "Then you'll have to suffer," he said. "But you know what suffering is, don't you, Denny?"

"But—I need my nose drops. I can hardly breathe."

Silvester said nothing more. The door at the top of the stairs closed.

Denny and Al looked at each other.

"I cad hardly breathe," Denny said.

"You expect me to sympathize?" Al asked.

"Bud, dab id! Id's nod fair!"

Denny looked the type who would kid around, but shoot fast and true if he was troubled too much. Al was still holding the door. He didn't dare let go of it: it might pop open. He had inserted the plastic card behind the bolt itself, so the bolt couldn't latch.

"Go sid down, like Howard said," Denny told him.

"The floor's damp," Al told the man.

Denny walked over in front of the door and stood there. A trickle on his upper lip told that he did have a very bad cold. His nose was red, his eyes bloodshot. He was sweating profusely.

Al knew that he had to work fast. If he waited until they began to work on him, until Silvester returned, he might never get out of here. Not alive, anyway. He was familiar with the methods of the Chinese, and it was anything but pleasant to consider.

"They're going to kill you," Denny said.

Al did not speak.

"Going to make id look like a disappearance," Denny went on. "After we ged wad we wad to know out of you."

"That cold," Al said. "It's a bad one."

"Id's killing me," Denny said. He suddenly sneezed, then cursed. He was trying to breathe and having a difficult time. "If I could only breathe," he said. "I can'd breathe through my moud, for some reason."

"Hell," Al said. "That's easily remedied."

Denny regarded him balefully.

"I mean it," Al said. "A thing my grandmother taught me. It's simple."

"You mean id?"

"Sure. Listen, put your head way back and pinch your nostrils." The man was standing directly in front of the steel-barred door. "Go ahead, try it."

"Well . . ." Denny threw his head back and pinched his nostrils.

"Now," Al said. "Lean as far forward as you can. It's best if your head is level with your knees, and keep pinching your nostrils. It clears it right up. Hold it there for a minute, though."

Denny leaned his head to his knees. As soon as he was bent forward, Al heaved with all his might on the barred door. It swung outward violently, and smashed with brutal force, a loud crack, against Denny's head. The Chinaman fell on his face, like a board.

"Hope that clears up your running nose," Al said softly.

He ran out into the cellar and began searching the walls. All the windows, at ground level, were barred. He couldn't take the time to work two or three bars loose, and he might not be able to do it, anyway.

He made for the stairs, went up them fast, paused, and hurried back to Denny. He took the man's gun, a .38 Savage pistol, and made for the stairs again. He went up them as swiftly and as silently as a cat, pushed carefully against the kitchen door, peered through.

The man who had worn the broken Panama hat was seated at the table, eating. He chewed thoughtfully, staring at the sink.

Al listened. There was no other sound, just the man's scrape of fork against plate.

Al slammed the door back and rushed into the kitchen.

The man dropped his fork and stood half on his feet.

Al leaped toward him, slugged him hard across the head with the pistol. The man fell against the table, spilled his plate of food, and sank to the floor.

It made too much noise. Somebody at the other end of the house gave a shout. "Lee?" Then there was the abrupt sound of running feet, pounding on loose floor.

Al was already beyond the back porch. He started for the opening in the stone walls that led into the street, then stopped.

The metallic gray two-door sedan sat in the back yard, one door open. His car. He turned for the car, slipped beneath the wheel, hoping wildly that the key was there. It was.

He started the engine and immediately gunned the car for the gate leading into the street. At the same time, two men raced off the porch. One yelled something. The other began firing a gun at the car. The shots, several of them, sounded as one ringing explosion.

Al struck the gate—it bent with a twang—and he drove over the tangled metal and into the street. He didn't know where he was, just that he was probably still in the Old Quarter. He turned to the left and put the accelerator against the floor. The car sped forward, rushing at four men who walked in the middle of the street. They dodged out of the way, cursing Al, and he swept on past. Then he recognized the street where Ali Hamid Barran's display was, saw the crimson draperies. He drove straight on, made a right turn, and moments later was heading back toward Assurugiya Street.

He drove at a sedate speed now, breathing sharply, unable to control the wild pulsing of his heart. It had

been close. He still could not believe he had managed his escape. He could not quiet his breathing.

Then he grinned to himself.

The feeling of freedom was pleasant.

X

"Here," Al said to Noah, handing him the .38 Savage.

Noah took the gun. "Where have you been? Where'd you get this? You don't carry a gun."

Al told him what had happened. "Silvester's for real," he finished. "He's a real drawn-out mean one, Noah. My father show yet?"

"No." Noah looked almost desperate. "He hasn't come. You'd better get ready for tonight. We can't wait for your father, Al." Noah rubbed his forehead, standing there in the hallway. "You've got a big job ahead of you."

Al looked narrowly at Noah. "Listen," he said. "I don't know whether I'm going to do it. I've been through enough already. Time to head for home, dad."

Noah was quick, and his voice was sharp. "I'm not fooling with you, Al. You do as you're supposed to or you'll see the inside of a cell at San Jobal again. That's a promise."

Al made a wry face. "You always throw that up at me, don't you?"

Noah just stood there, holding the gun.

Al wanted to say a lot of things. He remained silent. What was the point? Noah, his proclaimed friend, would see that he did return to San Jobal. That's how much he actually meant to the SIA. They held him under a threat, and they would never let go. Then he began to

calm a little and some of the bitterness dissipated. It wasn't really Noah Bain's fault. He was carrying out orders. They probably told Noah to threaten him with San Jobal every time he balked. Mr. Jack, chief of the program, was a real nasty. Almost as nasty as Howard Silvester. Damn them.

Noah said, "You mean they had you in a cell?"

"Yeah."

"But . . . under guard?"

"Sure, baby."

Noah's voice was abruptly gentle. "I'm sorry, Al. Sorry you have to take what you do. How'd you get away from them?"

"Denny had a head cold," Al said.

"What?"

But Al was already walking away. "Going to take a nap, ready-up for tonight."

"But . . . how?"

"Let it lay, old horse."

Al came into his room, flopped across the bed, lying on his face. He heard Rebecca Prince speaking rapidly downstairs, and Noah's low-toned voice answering her. They kept talking together, and Al lay there, quietly thinking. His father should have shown by now. What was keeping him? Suppose he hadn't received the cable? But certainly he had.

In the back of his head, Al knew his father would not arrive on time. It was a small voice that told him this. He tried to argue it down, but it was persistent.

The hell with it. He got up, stripped and showered, then dressed in his black nylon jumpsuit. He checked the bag of things Noah had selected from his home in Washington. He found his black pouch and began putting certain implements inside. He knew what he would

need. He did this lethargically at first, but as time swiftly passed, an eagerness took over. He felt the old good urgency. He checked his watch. There was still time. Time for a rest and some food. But could he rest?

He zipped the pouch closed, flung it on the foot of the bed, donned crepe-soled shoes, then stretched out on the bed again.

He lit a cigarette and quietly went over everything he had to do. He did not like any of it, especially the museum's alarm system. He knew he could not disconnect the system; there wouldn't be time. This was why he had so much wanted Alister Mundy's help. Well, he'd have to take his chances then. He was quite certain he could evade tripping the alarm, since he was practiced in this. Still it worried him. It was intricate. Highly sophisticated. But he knew, mostly, what the authorities had done to electrify the museum. And there would be guards.

His head still pained and throbbed from the crack the Chinaman had given him at Ali Hamid Barran's. He massaged his neck, then got up and took three yellow capsules. The headache vanished almost immediately.

If Alister Mundy would only show . . .

Suppose they had shipped the stoneware jackal earlier than planned. What then?

XI

Nine o'clock came all too fast. Al stood in the living room with Noah and Rebecca Prince. He held his pouch loosely in his right hand, and he felt lousy.

"It's obvious he's not coming," Noah said. "You've got to get going, Al. The museum's closed for the night. No telling what you'll have to do once you get there. You can't wait any longer. I can't let you wait."

Rebecca Prince said, "I think he's right, Al. Maybe your father was held up, somehow . . . somewhere."

"Held up?"

"I mean detained, silly."

Al drew a deep breath.

Noah said quickly, "And I don't want you to think I don't sympathize with what happened to you this afternoon. If I seem cold, or harsh, it's because there's a big job at hand—plenty at stake."

"Yeah," Al said. He sighed again. "Okay, I'm off."

"Will you be careful?" Noah asked.

"You're like an old woman," Al said. "I know what I'm doing."

"Yes. But I have a feeling about this whole caper."

"Fix him a drink, will you?" Al asked Rebecca.

She walked with him to the front door. Noah remained standing in the middle of the living room, rubbing his forehead.

Rebecca Prince looked good. She took Al's arm, leaned

against him. "Don't worry about your father. From what I hear, he can take care of himself."

"I do worry," Al said. "I know you're right, of course. But he never let me down."

"There's surely a reason."

"Yeah," he said shortly. He patted her hand, turned and opened the door. "So long, darling."

He went out, closed the door, and stood there a moment on the sprawling gallery. The night was close. He didn't like the damp, muggy air. But there was a wind, and it held a desert dryness.

The drive to the museum seemed short. He felt excited now, knowing he was going to do the job alone. It had been like this lately anyway. He was used to himself, but at the back of his mind was the usual gnawing about the SIA and its hold over him. He tried to think of himself as free, but it was a bittersweet freedom.

He parked the metallic gray sedan in the street outside some tall hedges, at the north side of the museum grounds. He did not hesitate, but immediately slung his pouch over one shoulder, broke through the hedge, and ran as fast as he could across the well-landscaped area. He halted beside a tall Egyptian statue, in dark shadow, and took a look at the museum.

It seemed quiet. Spotlights, strategically located on the lawn, gleamed whitely on the stone side of the immense building. He knew where he had to go, and ran again, dodging through what shadow there was for another statue of a seated king.

He half knelt by the broad plinth and looked at the side of the building, perhaps twenty feet away. Just then he saw a moving figure. It was a guard, carrying a sidearm, patrolling the outside of the museum. He

knew they had plenty to protect, but just the same he hurled a light curse at the man. He waited until the guard rounded the end of the building, then raced for a dark patch against the side of the British wing, where the spotlights did not glare brightly.

Directly beneath the British wing, he stood on cement sidewalk by a low hedge of holly and gazed upward at the looming, two-story edifice. He checked quickly in his pouch, withdrew a thick coil of very lightweight nylon rope with a three-pronged scaling hook attached to one end. He gave a sigh but did not wait, loosed the coil, readied it, and flung the hook up at the far ledge. The rooms in the museum were immense, tall, so the two stories were really closer to the average four. The hook snapped against the stone, missed the ledge, and fell back.

Al recoiled the nylon rope, checking all the time for a reappearance of the guard. Again he threw, and this time the hook snagged the ledge.

He gave it two swift, hard yanks. Secure.

He immediately leaped high, grasping the nylon, and swung himself in against the stone sides of the building.

His path up the side of the building was swift, almost like running. Agile, strong hands were a blur of quick fists, his soft-soled shoes against the stone. Going up, he recalled how he had practiced this under his father's supervision, long years before.

"Always keep in practice, son," Alister Mundy had said. *"It's a charming way to enter a building without employing the doors."*

Al grinned to himself as he ascended like a breath past the second-story windows, keeping against the stone walls.

Just as he was three feet from the ledge itself, he

heard footsteps coming from below, glanced down. It was the guard. Al stopped climbing, swung in flat against the stone and, hanging like a fly, watched the guard. The man below walked slowly along. Then, just beneath Al, he stopped, looking around, and withdrew something from a jacket pocket. Cigarettes. He lit up, took two long drags, then commenced walking again. He did not look up.

As soon as the guard was around the corner, Al flashed upward again, reached the ledge, and skinned over with a short gasp of relief.

He hunkered momentarily, rubbing his palms together. The nylon rope was thin, and the climb had not been easy. He shrugged his shoulders, lifted the scaling hook, and wound up the cord, looking across the flat roof toward the hump of the skylight.

With the nylon looped over his arm, he hastened to the skylight and looked down into a room of the British wing. Amber night lights down there. A pleasure indeed.

He checked the skylight. It was not wired. Bless them. He knew the vault would not be wired. *Just get there.* The skylight was latched on the inside, at the opening. He snapped the latch with a thin-bladed knife, lifted the window all the way back and laid it flat, then hooked the scaling prong on the ledge of the skylight base, dropped the nylon rope, wormed over, and slid down into the room.

His only worry was the alarm system. He felt certain he could avoid it.

He was inside the museum now, and none the worse for wear. Things had to be fast. He was never one to tarry, believing in a quick, positive attitude of action.

He knew guards might be patrolling inside the museum, but counted on his professional silence. He ran.

There was absolutely no sound of running as he went out into the hall, down the hall to the stairs, and on the banister itself to the foot of the stairs with flashing speed.

In the lower main hall he ran along the walls, dodging cases in the amber glow from well-spaced night lights, until he reached the curator's, El Roda's, offices.

The first door was open and he slipped inside, closed the door and stood in absolute darkness. He reached into his pouch, came up with a small but powerful flashlight, and moved over to the inner door.

He thought he heard something and tensed, listening.

Nothing . . .

Quickly he withdrew a plastic card from his breast pocket. The card was similar to the one he'd used on the barred cell door at Howard Silvester's. He slipped it between the jamb and the door at the lock, thrust forcefully and felt the oiled bolt slide back. He pushed the door open, pocketed the card and entered El Roda's office.

At the right-hand wall, he felt around with his hand, found a thick cord, pulled. Heavy draperies slid apart, and he stood staring at the vault door.

It was a beauty. . . .

Slick, gleaming steel confronted him, and he immediately knew the make of the safe lock itself, knew how to break down the combination. Another might have given up right here, because it was a *Markham VI*, with delicate tumblers. Not Al Mundy. His experience, his deep knowledge of this craft was voluminous. He did not hesitate for an instant, but began to work on the large black and silver dial.

He gripped the steel-barred handle of the vault door itself as he worked, his cheek pressed tightly against

the steel. He did not look at the numerals on the combination dial, but worked almost entirely by feel.

Actually he was relieved. It well might have had a time lock, and then he'd have been in deep water.

He began to perspire, a fine sheen. He laid the flashlight on the floor, examined the dial again closely then recommenced work.

He heard the distinct oily *drit* as the first tumbler slipped and knew he had the secret. He blew a gust of breath, his face stern in the pale light from the flash.

Instants later he pulled down on the handle and heaved at the large steel door. It swung out into the room without a sound, and he was looking into the vault itself, beyond a steel gate. The vault lit up as soon as the door was opened. The gate had a small combination lock. He had this open in moments and stepped into the vault.

Steel drawers and crates confronted him.

It was sickening. Which crate held the jackal?

The crates were stacked along two walls of the vault.

There was only one thing to do, but first he checked labels on the crates. Hopeless. They were all marked *Fragile*, in Arabic. There were no addresses, only numbers. Obviously the numbers corresponded to addresses on a list somewhere, and the boxes would be marked for shipment when the actual time came.

He knew he had to open the crates, examine each one.

A mess.

He stood there, ran a hand across his thick hair.

He turned back into the office, picked up the flashlight, and wandered over to the broad desk. His heart quickened. A stapled sheaf of papers lay on the desk, held down by El Roda's silver pencil.

Numbers and addresses. Al began to hum to himself, checking the sheets. *Crouching hyena. Amos Robinson. Beirut.* There was an address, and a number: *Number 9.*

Al carefully returned the sheaf of papers to the desk, laid the pencil on top, and hurried back into the vault.

It took only moments to find Number 9. But it was stacked beneath three other boxes. He removed these boxes, then tried to heft Number 9. It was a large crate, utterly ungainly, obviously packed with great care. He could not haul the damned thing from the museum.

He considered the papyrus scroll and what it meant, what it could mean to the entire world.

He went to work on the box, but the wood was strong, the crate heavily nailed. He checked the inside of the vault and found the crating tools on top of a steel file. There was a short crowbar. He went back to the crate and dealt with it in short order.

He looked at the heavy packing, withdrew the strips of padded paper, and there was the jackal.

A hellish looking thing, with jeweled eyes and what looked like ancient paint in many colors.

He hefted the jackal. It wasn't heavy at all.

Outside the safe, with the jackal under his arm, he closed the vault door and immediately left the office, closing and locking the inner door, closing the outer doors.

Again he ran, down the hall past the shadowed cases and high tapestries, through the shadows, to the stairs. He came up the stairs three at a time, down the upstairs hall, along the corridor and into the skylight room of the British wing.

Reaching into his pouch, he withdrew a short length

of nylon, tied the ends to the jackal's legs, fore and rear, and flung it over his back.

He grasped the hanging nylon rope and went up hand over hand with startling speed, lifted himself through the skylight, leaned and withdrew the rope and scaling hook. He ran to the edge of the building, looked down. Nothing. He hooked the scaling prongs to the ledge, flung the rope out and over, and heard the footstep on the roof, somewhere behind him. He whirled and felt the jackal swing on his back, and felt the rope slip. The cord that tied the jackal had come loose. It fell. He made a grab for the stoneware figure, missed, while at the same instant seeing the Arab guard coming toward him slowly along the roof, past the skylight, carrying a gun.

The guard shouted something.

Al glanced down over the building, heard and saw the jackal smash with an explosive sound on the cement sidewalk far below. He did not wait, but dove for the nylon rope, grabbed it, and flipped over the ledge just as the Arab guard fired at him. The slug struck the stone ledge above Al's hands and ricocheted off into the night.

Again the guard yelled.

Al was already to the ground, sliding on the rope, his hands burning fiercely. He struck the ground hard, dodged over beneath the projecting edge of a window, among the holly bushes.

He saw the smashed and scattered pieces of the stoneware jackal on the cement sidewalk. *The scroll,* was all he could think.

The guard fired down the side of the building.

There was no scroll. All Al saw, lying on the cement among broken shards, was a brown manila envelope.

He leaped out, grabbed this, and ran for the shelter of the nearest statue, out on the turfy lawn, gray-green in the pewter moonlight. He made the statue, with the Arab guard on the roof firing down at him.

Right then the museum alarm system broke loose. Wild, savage, it echoed violently through the night, a crazed pounding of gongs and bells that would surely wake the city. Al was glad he hadn't tripped the alarm; it would have marred his professional attitude.

He saw another guard come pounding around the corner of the museum, gun gleaming.

The Arab on the roof shouted something, his mouth a black hole, soundless above the ringing alarm system. He pointed toward the statue, which was of an Egyptian maiden, head heavy with enormous glinting stones.

The guard at ground level ran toward the statue at a jog, aiming his gun.

Al whirled and leaped across the lawn toward the far hedge. The guard fired, the sound faint in the midst of the wild ringing. But Al heard the *snick* as the slug tore through the hedge.

He burst beyond the hedge, still carrying the manila envelope, and ran for his car, parked close by. He was startled to hear the engine revving, smoke purling from the exhaust, and he saw a shape behind the wheel. Somebody called to him.

"Come on, Al!"

It was Rebecca Prince, in the car.

He flung open the door just as the guard came through the shielding hedge.

Rebecca Prince gave him a quick smile and floored the accelerator. Al's door was still open, as he fumbled with the manila envelope.

As they drove quickly away, he could still hear the savage beat of the museum's alarm.

The guard was in the street, firing his revolver at the rear of the car.

"I was worried," Rebecca Prince said, making a tire-squealing left turn. "I took a cab out here. Just waited around for you, thinking you might need some help." She paused.

Al gave a hollow-sounding whistle.

"You get the papyrus scroll?" she asked.

"Nothing like it. An envelope, and a thin one at that." Al tapped the envelope with his thumb. "There was nothing else in that bloody jackal."

"Damn." Miss Prince's voice was heavy with dismay.

XII

Noah tore open the brown manila envelope with a hasty gesture.

"Take it easy," Al said.

"I can't take it easy." Noah breathed heavily and withdrew a single sheet of heavy bond paper from the envelope. The sheet was typewritten with elite type. " 'To whom it may concern,' " Noah read. "What the hell is this?"

"We've been led down the garden path?" Al asked.

"What are you doing?" Noah said tightly, turning quickly to Al.

"Don't bite my head off, dad. I'm rubbing some special salve on my palms. I singed 'em, coming down that rope."

"I'm sorry, Al," Noah said with sudden gentleness, the sheet of paper trembling in his hand.

Rebecca Prince and Al leaned close above Noah's shoulder, and they all read:

To whom it may concern:
This is to make fact that there exists a papyrus scroll containing, in glyph, the formula for a disabling nerve gas, defined and discovered by one Tre Henda circa the First Dynasty. This gas is like nothing in the world to date. I have worked the formula into reality, and state that the gas is far too deadly, too precocious, too definitive, to let loose

in any *hands. I am, therefore, taking certain measures upon myself. I have debated, and after some time, concluded, that my way is best. In all repugnance, in all downright wonder, I can do nothing else. The world suffers enough, without another deadly addition to its ghastly arsenal of demolishment and sure desolation. I have considered my move from every side, and only know now that I must die, because of this discovery, and because of what I must do. I must kill a man to prevent knowledge of the formula from getting into the wrong hands. But there are no "wrong" hands. All hands, rather, are wrong. So I am taking steps. I cannot, because of my innate nature, because of—call it historical incentive—destroy the papyrus scroll with the formula. I am, therefore, returning it to whence it came—the vault in the Pyramid of Kra Hotep. Let it be known—I am the only man who can open this vault, or perhaps even locate it, and when you read this I shall be dead. I made the vault ready for opening the first time. I must leave some trace of where that scroll is, for humanity's sake. I am a weak man, I know. I am a frightened man, frightened not alone of my own certain death, but of what I am doing, must do. I plan to kill my chief advisor and one-time friend, John Koch. I shall also die because of this gesture. Koch cannot be trusted. I hope I am not too late. Then I shall kill myself. Go then, and be damned. I leave this warning to whatever future generation, taking with me at least the cognizance of my own.*

There was a bold signature:
Amos Dillon Robinson.

This was followed, at the bottom center of the page, by one more line:

Remember–THE LAUGHING HYENA WATCHES!

Al capped the tube of salve he'd been using and laid it on an end table. He sighed and straightened up, then looked at Noah.

Noah continued to pore over the Robinson paper.

"What does it mean?" Noah asked.

"The scroll's in the pyramid," Miss Prince said.

"She's right, dad," Al said.

"He was a meticulous old bastard," Noah said. "But he didn't tell us a thing. He relieves himself with his 'historical incentive,' but leaves us out in the cold."

"Where he wanted us to be," Al said softly.

"It's a conundrum," Noah said. "And we've got to solve it. We can't let it rest. Look at that last line. He was plenty worried."

"He probably thought even leaving this much behind was the wrong move," Miss Prince said. "But he couldn't help himself. He had a conscience, for sure."

"What do we do, Noah, baby?" Al asked.

A man gently cleared his throat from across the room, by the hall doorway.

Al turned sharply. "Father!"

It was Alister Mundy, his expression cool, standing quietly, holding Nesha Robinson's hand. Alister Mundy grinned pleasantly at Nesha, then raised his brows at the other three across the room.

"Look what I discovered by the front door," he said. His voice was smooth, educated, with a tinge of humor, a cynical, very wise humor. "Just inside the door, I might add. Listening attentively. Charming, isn't it? Does anyone know the creature's name?"

"You're Al!" Nesha said to Al. "And you," she said, pointing her free hand at Rebecca Prince, "you really *are* Rebecca. And you," she said to Noah. "You're Noah. You're not Thomas Longren and Gregor Flanders, not at all. I *knew* you weren't diggers. Now I'm for sure!" Abruptly she gave a little giggle. "And this?" she said, pulling at Alister Mundy's hand, but getting nowhere. "This is your father, Al? How cute. How positively *cute.*"

"What's your next move, Alexander?" Alister Mundy asked softly.

"I was worried," Al said. "Damn it, Father, the first bit of the excitement's over. Just when you were needed. Where were you?"

Alister Mundy's expression did not change at first, then his peaceful blue eyes widened faintly. "There was a certain countess, son. She was away from Rome, and I was away from Rome and—well, disenchanting as it may sound, she detained me. You do understand?"

"Oh, great," Al said.

"Miss Robinson," Noah said, quickly crossing the room. "I'm afraid you'll have to leave. We have very urgent business to transact. As for the names, well, put it down to poetic license. Could you?"

"I went horseback riding," Nesha said. "This afternoon. I love horses, and I ride a lot. I thought all afternoon. I didn't dig the horse, and he didn't dig me. I was troubled. Then I played tennis. I won, but I really lost, because my heart wasn't in the game. It was here, understand? And I think you owe me some sort of explanation."

She wore pale blue jeans, a white shirt open at the throat. Her long blonde hair danced across her agitated shoulders.

She said, "I can only stand so much subterfuge. I think I'm entitled."

"It's a shame, little one," Alister Mundy said, looking down at her with concern. "But it's also obvious that you must go. Now."

Nesha suddenly broke loose from Alister Mundy's grasp and ran over beside Al. She looked at him defiantly. "I don't want to go. I want to help. Don't you understand? It's something to do with my father, isn't it? Well, isn't it? Tell me, don't just stand there. You *know* how I feel about you, Al."

"Mundy," Al said.

"Mundy?"

"Al Mundy."

"Oh, please let me help. I can help. Tell me what you're trying to do."

Al took her arm and immediately began to walk with her toward the hall entrance, speaking soothingly. "I promise to let you know. But for now, Nesha, will you run along home? We've something to discuss here, and I haven't seen my father for some time. I promise, really, to tell you all about it. But you'll have to wait. Okay?"

"Well . . ." She was hesitant.

"Please?" Al asked gently.

"Okay." She glanced up at him. Then she looked quickly at Alister Mundy. "Bye, dad."

"Please, little one, much gentler than that," he said.

She left Al and ran down the hall. The front door slammed, and Al heard her cross the gallery, run down the steps.

"If she tells her mother, we can be in a bit of a jam," Noah said.

"She won't," Al said. He turned to his father. "Hi, again." He took Alister Mundy's hand.

"You look well, Alexander."

"Feel well."

"Why are your palms so greasy?"

"Oh, excuse," Al said. "Fried 'em on the old rope trick. Touch of salve. They'll be fine."

Alister rubbed his palms together. "Well, then. Let's get on with the tale."

"Where're your bags?"

"In the hall."

Al looked for changes in his father, but he seemed the same as when he'd seen him last. Tall, lean almost to thinness, he wore a buff-colored shirt open at the throat, with a rust scarf. His loose-fitting pearl gray jacket looked fresh from the tailor's. Charcoal slacks hung neatly above Italian loafers. The man's face was eager, thin, touched with humor and life and wit, but it was also charged with something hidden, secretive, that was much more difficult to define. This was the Mundy secret itself, which both Al and his father possessed. Energy was the secret's base, but it ran the gamut from outright courage to the near intangible resourcefulness of the cynic. They were both a collection of all that was good, but also of all that was wily. Al respected his father deeply; respected his immense wealth, and respected even more deeply how he had obtained that wealth without ending up in some remote prison. There was a bond between the two men that was unbreakable.

Noah stood a bit in awe of Alister Mundy. In Al's memory, Noah had never known exactly what to say to the elder master thief, for that's what Alister Mundy was. Some said he was the biggest of them all.

"And who is this?" Al's father asked, nodding toward Miss Prince. "I hear her name's Rebecca. A rewarding experience, having the name Rebecca. Quite fascinating."

"Rebecca Prince, Father," Al said. "She's come from England to help."

"I daresay," Alister Mundy said.

Al grinned as his father took Rebecca's hand, looked deeply into her eyes, patted the hand, turned quickly to Noah. "And Noah Bain. Is it sticky?"

"What?" Noah said.

"The situation," Alister Mundy said. "Sticky?"

"It's worse than that," Al said.

"Believe me, son, no time like the present."

Noah said, "I can't exactly condone your coming, Alister. What I mean is, the SIA did not call you in. Al did. And, against my better judgment, I might add."

Alister Mundy looked at Al, a gentle smile on his face. "Noah does worry, doesn't he?"

"It's his special diet."

"Well, I'm here. I'll do what I can, if my services can be used." He glanced at Rebecca Prince. "I'll help. Okay?"

Noah's face was solemn. "All right. Al, you fill him in."

Alister Mundy moved over to the couch, sat down, crossed his legs and lit a cigarette. "Let's have the dirty words, son."

XIII

" 'The laughing hyena watches,' " Alister Mundy read aloud, finishing the Robinson paper. He looked up and frowned. Al had briefed him on everything that had happened, including all about Robinson and the pyramid find at Giza. "What the devil d'you suppose he meant by that?"

"It's a hint of some kind," Al said. "Old Amos actually wants somebody to find that damned vault and the scroll. It hurts him that it isn't with the world, even though he dug his conscience a bit more than his child-like eagerness. He wants to ,reach out from the dead, Father. He wants a hand in the world pot, you might say."

"I daresay you're right, son."

Noah was fairly vibrating, his eyes continually blinking now. "We should get out there. We can't spare a moment," he said. "We know Silvester's looking for the scroll. He may have a lead. And there's Kovotov to consider."

"Erstwhile members," Alister Mundy said, coming lithely to his feet. "Let's get started, then."

"Al will not carry a gun," Noah said simply. "I hope you have no such reserve."

"I'm afraid I have," Al's father said. "Guns are for the clumsy, the wooden-heads of the world, Noah." He shook his head. "No guns for me."

"But there are two Arab guards out there, patrolling the site of the diggings," Noah said. "What are we supposed to do with them?"

Alister Mundy chuckled softly and glanced at Al. "Are you in good form?"

"Excellent, Father."

"Then what's to worry, Noah? Let's just get this bash on the road."

"Noah's right, you know," Rebecca Prince said.

Alister patted her shoulder. "Don't fret, my dear. Battles are won by the courageous, not by the insipid."

She flashed him a quick look of doubt. She was frowning, and Al thought she looked rather sweet in the deep green short skirt, the ruffled green blouse.

"You wearing that?" he asked her.

"I don't intend to do battle," she said.

Noah was already pressing them toward the door. "I don't know how we'll manage," he said. "But we've got to try. I figured we might have to go out there. I have a Coleman lantern and flashlights." He sighed. "Not much to count on. But . . ." He vanished into the hall, returned holding the equipment. "Shall we go?"

"By all means," Alister Mundy said. He glanced at his watch. "I'm due back in Rome by tomorrow noon," he said. "Think we'll make it?"

Noah's gaze was perplexed.

They left the house and went out to the car. Al slipped behind the wheel and his father sat with him, while Noah and Rebecca climbed into the back.

They were on Helwan, driving fast for the Al Malik El Saleh Bridge, across the Sayalet, a minor tributary of the River Nile, on the east side of an island, when Rebecca Prince, her voice soft, said, "We're being tailed,

friends. We picked him up eight blocks back. He's three cars behind, and quite adept."

"Noticed that, my dear," Alister said. "But didn't want to alarm anyone."

Al said, "I've already planned to lose him on the island. He'll think we're visiting somebody out there."

Noah was nervous. "He'll think no such damned thing," he said brusquely. "I wish you'd get it through your head, Al, that they're not stupid. Kovotov's a brilliant man and a practiced agent. Silvester is worse, in the right way, if you get what I mean."

"Put on the nose bag, old horse," Al said.

"Don't be cute with me," Noah said.

"He's closing in," Rebecca Prince said as Al stopped for a light, then started to turn for the bridge. "He's coming up like crazy."

Al sent the sedan speeding ahead, straight over the bridge. He saw the car behind in the rear-view mirror now. It was also on the bridge, and obviously the driver was taking no chances on getting lost.

It teed Al off. He floored the accelerator, passed two cars ahead of him, and came off the bridge onto the island road flat out. He kept straight on, then braked abruptly, and swung violently left onto Al Manyal Street, which led toward Nilometer, at the very tip of the island. They were in a residential street. He took a sharp right then, and immediately darted into a dark alley between two high stone walls. Again he floored the pedal. The car swerved from side to side in sandy ruts and the sound of the wild engine roared between the walls, echoing in the night.

Al stopped the car at the end of the alley and they sat there. Nobody spoke for a moment.

"You've lost him, son."

"Don't bet on it. These birds are screwy, and screwy birds you can't depend on."

"I'm sure you've lost whoever it was," Noah said. "Head for Giza, Al."

"Okay, general."

Alister Mundy chuckled quietly; and they were on their way again. They crossed the Giza Bridge over the Nile. The waters looked blue-black below, covered with diamonds. They swung into Al Ahram Street and headed for the desert.

Al had a certain strange feeling about this trip. He felt one with the centuries of time. Even the air was somehow mysterious. Since it was night, there were very few tourists out this way, planning to view the Giza pyramids.

"I'll direct you once we're at the Mena House," Noah said. "We'll take the camel trail right by the Sphinx."

"You sure you know the way?"

"Yes, Al. Leave it to me."

"Don't I always?"

It wasn't long before they were by the large Mena House Hotel, place of departure for sightseers bent on seeing the pyramids. They turned off the road, and now they were in the real desert. The night held a blue-gray cast; the moon was three-quarters full and as still as an alabaster rock in the sky.

There wasn't another car in sight. It seemed extremely lonely, and Al wondered how it would turn out. He didn't exactly like what he was doing, but he could not say he disliked it either.

The moon seemed to drip stars. There was a curious scintillance in the heavens, as if silver dust had been thrown aloft, to settle in weird patterns of light. The depths of darkness were startling between the stars,

and the desert looked almost white. It wasn't long before they passed the towering pyramid of Cheops, dead black against the paler sky. Then they were in sight of the Chephren, over behind the lurking Sphinx. The gleaming Sphinx guarded the night, rock-faced and stolid. Then they saw the smallest of these three pyramids, that of Mycerinus.

"Khufu, Khafre and Menkure," Rebecca Prince said.

"Come again, my love?" Alister said.

"The pyramids," she told him. "Their real names. They date from 2700 B.C. Khafre, or Chephren, is the second highest, and it stands four hundred and forty-seven and one half feet high. If you look, you can see the original white limestone coating near the top. It shines like the moon." She paused. "Menkure is two hundred and eighteen feet high, and Khufu, or Cheops, is four hundred and forty-eight. It covers thirteen acres of desert. Imagine. Every block of stone in that thing weighs an average of two and a half tons."

"They were mighty men," Al said.

"Just keep straight ahead," Noah said nervously. "We're headed right for Kra Hotep."

"Where's the poet in you, Noah?" Al asked. "Wouldn't you like to run over and visit the Temple of the Sphinx? Could be beautiful on a night like this."

Noah grunted, but said nothing.

"You've got no heart," Al said. "I always knew it. Work is your middle name, Noah, baby. All you can think. Get the job done."

"That's exactly how the book reads," Noah said. "And you can cut your lights now. We're going into a small valley and at the end is the pyramid. Robinson's find. We don't want to alert those guards."

"Sure there are only two?" Alister asked.

"Yes. The site encloses quite a large-sized village, remember. Walls still stand. Rooms. Lots of rubble, from what I'm told. We'll have to run by ear."

"Not exactly," Rebecca Prince said, a trace of petulance in her tone. "I'm here, remember?"

"You been to the Robinson diggings?" Noah asked.

"No. But I've gone over every map with a magnifying glass. I know right where the pyramid entrance is, too."

"I don't like the sound of this vault," Alister said.

Al said nothing. But he concurred. He switched off the headlights and they slipped across the silent desert night, sand hissing against the tires. There was no wind, now, only a slight desert breathing of dryness and chill. He could see perfectly with the moonlight, but this could be a hindrance when they approached the Arab guards.

They had to locate those guards. . . .

"You can see the digs," Rebecca Prince said. "See those mounds? They're like small hills. Imagine the work they've done here."

"Imagine, girl, what *we* have to do," Noah said.

Al gunned the engine, increasing the car's speed, then cut the ignition. They began to coast silently.

"No point taking chances," he said.

Nobody spoke. Then, as they came along the old camel path and drifted in close against a twenty-foot mound of earth, Al braked the car. They sat there for a long moment, looking up over the edge of the mound, seeing nothing but inky moonlit sky.

"There's the pyramid, back over there," Rebecca said. "Kra Hotep. See it?"

They looked and saw the enormous black hulk of rock rising against the sky. It seemed only somewhat

smaller than Cheops, but Al knew it could not be that large. An illusion of night. Points on the great pyramid surface, near the triangular top, gleamed like fire, reflecting bright moonlight.

Al opened his door. The silence of the desert darkness crept into the car and sat with them. It was a ghostly intruder.

"Let's go," Alister whispered to Al.

"Just a sec."

Al reached behind the seat, came up with his black pouch, unzipped it, and withdrew two lengths of nylon cord. He handed them to Alister, saying nothing. Then he found two more cords for himself, tucked them beneath his belt.

"Okay," he said. "We'll have a go." He turned to Noah Bain. "You and Rebecca just wait here."

Noah spoke in an anxious whisper. "But what do you plan to do?"

"Plans gae agley," Al said quietly. "No plans, no worries, Noah, baby. Father and I will just see what we can do about clearing the path."

He stood beside the car. Alister Mundy stepped out and glanced up at the mound of earth beside them.

Al moved his arm. "You circle east, I'll go west. We'll meet back here in fifteen minutes, unless we meet before."

"Right," Alister whispered. "See you, son. And I take it we should fix 'em so they rest till morning?"

Al grinned in the moonlight and nodded. He turned away and worked slowly up the slope of the mound. He glanced back once, but saw nothing of Alister Mundy. There was no sound from the dark parked car where Noah and Rebecca Prince waited.

He moved off along the side of the slope of the

mound. He could see the sunken city of Kra Hotep, the ancient remains of the Egyptian dwellings revealed starkly in the moonlight. It looked decayed, or like a village of stone huts that had been bombed. He could see streets dug between the shadowed buildings. All of this was overlooked, surmounted by the colossal pyramid. Al suspected Amos Robinson had never finished uncovering the entire city. It seemed farther buildings must continue where the mounds were met by crumbling walls. Coming discovery would reveal whether he was right.

This did not matter now. Where were the guards? He knew they would not be together. He hoped they didn't see him first.

He stopped, flattened himself against a worn path.

A shadow moved slowly up ahead, outlined against the sky, on top of the mound of earth. He saw the flash of moonlight on a rifle barrel and heard a man clear his throat.

Down the slope, beyond where the guard walked, was eerie light, moving shadows. A small fire. Then Al made out the lines of a wooden shack. The guard shack. The Arab guard walked in that direction.

Al moved quickly, lightly along the top of the slope of earth. The guard was moving down the slope. He came into the firelight and Al saw the bronzed features. The man was scratching his chin. Al abruptly came fast down the slope beside the shack and leaped.

The guard whirled, holding the rifle out with both hands. He wore a tan tunic, a peaked cap, and his face was touched with fright. Al was already upon him, twisting the rifle up, fighting to get behind the man. The Arab was like a thick eel, muscles bunched. He grunted and let loose a violent sputter of Arabic, strug-

gling to bring the rifle barrel around toward Al. Al kicked at the rifle, caught the man's hand.

Then he had his arm around the Arab's throat. The guard flung himself wildly about, but Al hung on tightly, searching with his right thumb for a pressure-point just behind the man's ear. The Arab, realizing he could not use the rifle, tried to bite Al's hand, bright teeth flashing.

Al jabbed at the pressure-point.

The man screamed. Al firmly held his thumb deeply imbedded at the rear of the neck. The guard stopped fighting. He seemed to freeze, standing there. Then he dropped forward, falling directly on his face.

Al stood over him, breathing deeply. He checked inside the shack. Boxed lunches. A bottle of red wine. Two chairs and a narrow blanket-covered bunk.

The fire, small but neat, blazed in front of the shack.

He returned to the fallen Arab. He hoped Noah was correct when he said there were only the two guards. Then he began to worry about Alister Mundy. Was he as capable as he had always been, since his long days of leisure?

Al took the nylon cords from his belt and dragged the Arab into the shack. He stretched the man out on the bunk, a burly-shouldered fellow with an aquiline nose. He bound the man with the nylon cords, hands and feet, fastening him to the bunk in such a way that any struggle would only draw the cords tighter. The Arab would be there at least until his relief came. Since the box lunches had not been eaten, the wine untouched, the relief obviously wasn't due for some time.

Al returned to the fire, dropped two dry sticks on the small blaze, and ran lightly up the slope again. He started back for the car.

But now there were two cars. He saw them from the slope in the darkness, the black shapes. He approached warily. Then he saw Alister standing in front of their car. Noah and Rebecca were beside him.

Alister Mundy was speaking in a low voice to Nesha Robinson, who wore jeans and a white blouse.

"Hi," Al said. "How'd you make out?"

"Mine's resting," Alister said. "I dare say yours isn't running about balling it up. Look who's here. Little Miss Alice in Wonderland."

"Oh, Al—they won't listen to me," Nesha said. "I'm the one who was following you in the city. But I was being tailed myself. I lost them, though, whoever they were. I knew you'd be coming here—it was the only possible place. It's something concerning my father. Right?"

Noah was obviously irritated. He did not want the girl around. "You'll have to return to Cairo," he said. "You're wasting your time and ours."

Nesha was thin-lipped and adamant. "I won't go back! I'm going to stay right here with you. Amos Robinson was my father. I've got a right to be here."

"Well?" Al said to Noah. "I think she means it. You going to escort her home, baby?"

Alister Mundy chuckled. "Let her stay, Noah."

"We've got to get to the pyramid," Noah said. His face was grim. "All right, you can stay." He turned abruptly away from her, looking toward the ancient city.

"Then let's go," Al said. He returned to the car, picked up the Coleman lantern. Noah handed around flashlights. Nesha Robinson was eager now. Moonlight touched her face, and Al saw she was smiling.

Rebecca Prince was glum. But such were the ways of women. And Miss Prince was all woman. Al was

certain of that. A bright sense of urgency was building inside him, as it always did when he neared a goal. He glanced at his father and knew he experienced the same thing.

They left the cars and started up the slope.

XIV

At the top of the slope, they stood outlined against the paler sky. Alister Mundy suddenly turned and, reaching up, gave his nose a twisting yank.

"Don't forget, Alexander!"

"Don't worry, Father."

Alister Mundy grinned.

"Now what's that supposed to mean?" Noah asked in a forced whisper.

"Nothing that concerns you," Al said. "And you don't have to whisper now. There's nobody to hear you but us chickens. Speak it up, Noah."

"It's weird out here," Noah said. "I don't feel right. Let's get to the pyramid."

Although Al gave a short laugh, he knew what Noah meant. Anything that had been buried for a long time and then dug up was a gloomy proposition. The ancient Egyptian city was this tenfold. There was something about the way the moonlight played on the crumbling ruins, something about the gleaming stones atop the towering black pyramid.

They started down the slope and went until they were on one of the ancient streets. The streets were neatly cleaned, and their footsteps echoed in the engulfing darkness. Al thought of the feet that had once trod these polished stones, so long, so very long ago.

They came along the street, moving toward the pyra-

mid. The street was a very gentle slope, leading to the immense structure of stone.

Nesha Robinson was by Al's side. Alister Mundy led the group, taking long-legged strides, carrying the still unlighted Coleman lantern. Al stepped up to his father and took the lantern from his hand.

"What's this?" Alister asked.

"I'm going to light it in a minute," Al said. "I don't like all this dark."

He felt a pull at his elbow. It was the girl, Nesha.

"Listen," she said. "Can't you tell me what's going on?"

"Better you don't know," Al said. "You'll probably find out anyway, later on. But I can't be the one to tell you."

She clung to his arm, pouting up at him, her hair pale in the night. "You're mean," she said. "You know very well you make my motor turn over."

He didn't speak.

"I mean it," she said. "I'm humming since I met you."

Rebecca Prince swung into step beside him and took his other arm, flashing Nesha Robinson a quick, wry glance. "The entrance to the pyramid is over there," she said, pointing.

"I know where the entrance is too!" Nesha said.

"Good girl," Rebecca Prince said. "I knew you had it in you."

"Now, now," Al said. "Let's just joggle along."

They climbed some broad stone steps to a new level and walked toward the base of the pyramid. The gigantic structure loomed over them. It seemed to slice into the night, thrusting into the very stars. As they came nearer, Al made out the immense stonework, and wondered at the powers of early Egyptian architec-

ture. How had they transported those stones? But that had puzzled the scientific world for eons. No one would ever be certain. It had been done.

"See that dark hole?" Rebecca said. "It's the entrance."

Alister Mundy's long legs carried him up another flight of stairs and across a broad flat-stoned entranceway that lay before the pyramid doorway itself.

"Time to light the lantern," Al said, once he was beside his father. Noah stood by, making small sounds in his throat. Al knew how much depended on what might happen. He knew how the SIA man felt. He knew what Noah carried on his back—the entire responsibility for this caper. If things went black, it fell on Noah's head really. Not Al's. Noah would apologize for Al if things buckled in the middle.

Al knelt down and pumped up the Coleman lantern. When he was satisfied, he lifted the chimney and lit the mantel with a quick match. Soon the lantern was hissing, throwing off a brilliant white glare.

The white light gleamed on the surrounding faces. They were all eager. All except for Alister Mundy, who was checking his gold wristwatch. Al knew he was considering the time between now and tomorrow noon, when he was due to return to Rome.

"Knock it off, Father," Al said.

"Would you believe I sent him to the finest schools in Europe?" Alister Mundy said to no one in particular. "And look how he addresses me, that tone, that rewarding knack."

"It's nothing to what he calls me," Noah said.

"I've noticed," Alister said. He motioned toward the entrance with one hand. "Just for that, Alexander, you may go first."

Al's level gaze narrowed and he stepped toward the entrance to the pyramid, carrying the lantern.

The passageway was not as Al had imagined it. It was narrow and it smelled of old, dry stone. There was dust everywhere; each footfall raised a cloud. They had to move single file. Al went first, with Noah directly behind him. Then came Nesha and Rebecca, with Alister Mundy bringing up the rear. They moved slowly, and were immediately in dead darkness, with the lantern cutting a swath of light that flashed against the hewn rock. But the light seemed insecure somehow. Al thought what might happen if they were deep inside the pyramid, and for some reason the lantern went out. They had flashlights. But suppose the old Egyptian gods did not admire intruders. There was a definite feeling about the ancient Egyptians, at night, in the pyramid of Kra Hotep. It was as if they lived again.

"It's something to do with what Robinson said," Noah said from behind Al. "I mean, the part about the 'watching hyena'—"

" 'The laughing hyena watches,' " Al said. "Yeah, I know it, old horse."

"I wish you wouldn't call me that."

They moved on and the passageway became still narrower and began to slant sharply downward. Al paced ahead as fast as he could. He wanted to finish this job off, return home. Then he recalled how Wallie Powers had phoned Noah, speaking about a new job. Would the damned SIA never let him rest?

"There's a turn," Al said. "It starts off at right angles, to the left. It goes up, this time."

"Keep moving. There's no other passage in the pyramid," Noah told him.

"How d'you know?"

"It stands to reason."

"Baby, if everything stood to reason, it'd be a simple world."

Al took the left turning. The passage slanted upward at a sharp angle. It was cut higher than the other had been. Suddenly he saw the light flash on a kind of platform of stone that leveled off. He crossed the platform, his footsteps ringing, and was abruptly in a large chamber. The roof was domed; the room was a perfect circle, the walls polished with off-white rock. At one side of the room the passage seemed to continue. It was a black hole that opened before them.

"Wait a minute, Noah. I want to speak to my father."

Noah was examining the walls. Al had already seen all he needed in this chamber. It gave no clue to the vault, and that was all that interested him at the moment.

Rebecca Prince and Nesha Robinson followed them into the vaulted room. Al looked back along the passage, holding the lantern high so rich glares of light flooded the walls.

"Father?"

There was no sign of Alister Mundy.

"Where is he?" Al asked. "He was behind you, Rebecca."

"I thought he was back there."

Al called loudly, "Father!"

There was no answer. Their voices echoed in the large hollow room, bouncing back at them from the rock walls.

Al said, "We've got to have a look."

"Al," Noah said. "I want to move on. That's final."

Al continued down the passage. He began to run now. He tasted the first touch of fear. He had asked

his father to join them. He was responsible. Where was Alister Mundy?

He made the turn in the passageway and went right. His feet thundered and rang on the stone, and the lantern's shadows leaped on the walls. Al's shadow ran on the left wall, taking long strides.

He reached the entrance, came out on the broad flat stone surface that lay before the door itself. There was no sign of Alister Mundy.

"Father!"

His voice lifted in the night, then dropped away, and there was only silence.

XV

"I looked everywhere," Al said. "All around the entrance, and I checked the length of the passageway. There are no turn-offs, no blind alleys. Where the hell could he be?"

Noah cleared his throat, laid one hand gently on Al's forearm. "Don't worry," he said. "If I know Alister, he can take care of himself."

"I just don't like it," Al said.

"Your father knows what he's doing," Rebecca Prince said. The lantern light gleamed in her eyes, and she smiled at Al. Nesha moved over by Al and took his arm. Rebecca said, "I'm sure he's all right, Al."

Nesha's voice was soft. "You're secret agents, aren't you. I know you are, so don't deny it. What does your father do? He's kind of special, isn't he? Like you?"

Noah's voice was sharp. "Miss Robinson, we've allowed you to tag along with us. Isn't that enough?"

She looked at him with quiet eyes.

"We've got to go look for my father," Al said.

Noah shook his head. "Sorry. Can't hear of that, Al. You know how things go."

"Sure. The game. But he's my—"

"It doesn't matter. We've got to find that vault. It's your job, Al. Not his. You shouldn't have called him to Cairo. I didn't like it when you told me you had, and

I like it less now. I don't want to lose anybody—least of all him."

Al's lips were tight. He stared at Noah.

"I mean it, Al. We're going on—to the vault, wherever it is." Noah paused. "Actually," he said, "I'm sure Alister is all right. It's a question of what we must do." Again he paused. "We go on, Al."

The curious echo of their voices died away in the circular room. A hollow silence descended about them all.

Al knew there was nothing to do but obey Noah's wishes. He could refuse to continue until after they had found Alister Mundy. But Noah would be hard to deal with. The SIA man had a one-track mind. Also he was probably correct in assuming Alister was all right, wherever he was.

Still, Al could not quiet the gnawing at the back of his mind.

"Okay," he said. "We go on."

Noah smiled grimly, motioned toward the dark passageway ahead of them. Again Al took the lead, with Noah behind, the two girls following.

No sooner were they in the passage and beyond another stone platform when the rocky hall took a sharp descent. It was difficult for them to keep their footing. Al's feet slid on the stone and grit. He braced himself with one hand against the hewn wall, moving sideways. It was very steep, and seemed to go sharply down toward the center of the earth. He knew they must be approaching the center of the pyramid now.

The air was dank down here, and it was cooling fast. The darkness was chilling.

"We're at the bottom," Al said. "There are two passageways. Damn it, which'll we take?"

"The left one," Noah said, peering past Al's shoulder.

"Left it is, then."

But they had gone only twenty feet or so when they met with a rock wall. The rock was smooth, and the passageway gave no clue to what it might have been those long centuries before.

"Back," Al said.

They returned to the fork and ascended on a slow slant up the right-hand passage. This went upward again for some fifty feet, then peaked and dropped away. Again Al took it sideways, slipping and sliding. He knew they were far into the pyramid now. Hundreds of feet of solid rock separated them from the outside.

"Wait—a room," Al said.

They came down steps into a rectangular room; the light revealed crimson stripes of paint on the walls. At the far end of the room was a square doorway up three steps. Al went over there. Noah was directly behind him.

The entire party entered the room.

It was square.

"Oh, Christ," Noah said.

The brilliant white glare of the Coleman lantern shown on the walls, the ceiling, the floors. Every inch of space was covered with paintings, in carefully executed color, of crouching, leaping, sitting, running, laughing hyenas. They faced in every possible direction. It was a weird assembly. The room seemed to laugh back at them.

"This is awful!" Rebecca Prince said. "He wrote about the laughing hyena. They're everywhere—they're all laughing."

"Yeah," Al said. "It's kind of grim, huh?" He turned to Nesha Robinson. "You know anything about this?"

"No."

Al explained to her about the paper of her father's that they had found. He told her how Robinson had written of the hyena.

"He never mentioned anything like that to me," Nesha said. "What are you looking for?"

"The vault," Noah said. He was rubbing his forehead, looking at the walls. His gaze came back to Al, and Al saw the despair in the man's eyes. "Hundreds of the damned things," Noah said. "Now what do we do?"

Al walked slowly around the big square room. The ceiling was high, the walls smooth and sound. The room had been built solid, within the pyramid itself, of enormous blocks of stone. The stone had been polished, and then painted with the laughing hyenas.

There had to be an answer.

Al looked closely at the walls. There were slightly raised ridges along every stone. But that was the trouble: this was true of every single block. He sighed softly, glanced at Noah, shook his head, then began examining the walls again.

"You'll never find it," Rebecca Prince said. She frowned at Al. "You may be good at opening standard safes, stuff like that. But this is different, Al Mundy. You can't even find the vault."

Abruptly Al grinned. He walked directly to the far end of the room, reached up as high as possible, until his fingers touched a small projecting ledge. It was the same type of ledge that was on every one of the blocks. He thrust against the ledge, then hung his weight on it.

Noah gave a short gasp.

The wall was moving. It swung slowly about, falling away from Al's pressing hand. The entire, enormous rock wall folded in upon itself, as quietly as if it were on roller bearings.

Dead air swept out upon them. Al held the lantern up.

They faced what was obviously an entrance hall of some kind, smooth-walled on the sides. The hall, or room, was rather narrow at the near end, enlarging at the other side.

The wall at the far end of the room was made of intersecting planed boulders of huge dimensions. These were much larger than those in the hyena room.

"That, my dears, is the vault," Al said.

He pointed at the far wall.

"But how will you ever get in there?" Noah asked, his voice a sudden whisper.

"We'll see," Al told him. He heard a footstep coming from the other room where the ubiquitous hyenas laughed. Noah turned at his glance.

A bright light shone on them, then was let down to glare on their feet.

"Go ahead," Howard Silvester said. He gave a short, throaty laugh. The Chinese agent was not alone: a broad, squat-looking fellow was with him. They both had revolvers. Silvester looked as strangely mummified as usual in a tight pale blue suit with gold threads running through the pattern. "Go right ahead," Silvester said. "Go open the vault, Mr. Mundy. We have your dear father, if you've wondered where Alister Mundy might be. Now you open the vault for me—or we take care of your father in our own righteous manner."

XVI

Al looked at Noah Bain and saw the cold despair in the SIA man's eyes. He turned back to Howard Silvester, planning to say something that might stall the Chinese agent, but it was just then he noticed Nesha Robinson was no longer with them. He looked back in the hyena room, but there was no sign of her. Had they taken her too? He was about to ask, then thought better of it.

Silvester took a step toward Al and the others.

"I assure you," he said, "your father will die a most painful death, if you don't do as I say." He paused. "I'll let Tommy here take care of him personally. Tommy is an adept, aren't you, my boy?"

The squat, thick-faced man did not smile. His eyes were flat and dead, his complexion of a curious pallor, his black hair greasy and shining in the light. He looked as if he had never smiled. The gun in his hand moved in a slow circle as he faced Al. He said, "I kill for you, Howard."

"Yes," Silvester said. "You'll kill for me. But, better still, you'll do other things before you kill, won't you, Tommy?"

"I do good things, interesting things," Tommy said, his voice velvety. And now there was a subtle change in the eyes. Al saw a cunningness, a deep-seated pleasure, revealed in those dark pupils. It was the pleasure

of anticipation. He was the type who would get his kicks tearing wings off insects.

Al said, "Where is my father?"

Silvester showed his teeth in what was supposed to be a grin. It was more of a grimace. "He is safe, for the moment . . . safe and silent."

Noah's voice was quiet. "You can't do it, Al."

"Look, Mundy," Silvester said, his voice nasty, "get it straight. I mean exactly what I say. If you want no harm to come to your father, then open that vault."

Again Noah spoke, and this time his voice was edged with determination. "I mean what *I* say, Al. You cannot open that vault. Think of what it means—just think." Noah paused. "I don't care what happens. You're not to obey this man."

Silvester's expression was slightly pained.

"He's got to do it!" Rebecca Prince said. "He must, Noah."

"Look," Al said. "I'm the one who's on the spot—"

Silvester smiled faintly.

"Me," Al said. "They've got my father out there someplace. His life depends on me. Can you understand that much?"

"One life doesn't matter," Noah said.

"The hell with you, Noah." Al stood there, quietly regarding Howard Silvester. Then he said, "But the thing is, I may not be able to open the vault."

"Are you sure that's it?" Silvester asked.

"Yeah," Al said. "That's it, all right. That wall."

"Let's go in there, then."

Rebecca Prince's voice was demanding. "You've got to do it, Al. Don't listen to Noah."

Al turned and walked into the room. He approached

the far wall and stood looking at it. He shook his head. "I can't be certain about a thing."

"But . . . it is the vault?"

"Yeah."

"You can do it?" Silvester spoke quickly.

"I don't know."

"You've got to do it. Otherwise your father dies—the hard way."

"Just think about what I said, Al." It was Noah again. He had entered the room and stood nearby.

Al glanced at the SIA man. Noah's face was stern, and he moved his head from side to side. Al knew what he was thinking. If the formula for the nerve gas got into the wrong hands, anything might happen. The U.S. was mostly concerned with Red China. Howard Silvester was their representative, and a more undependable person he surely had never met. Silvester, also in the room now, with the gun still trained on Al's chest, was breathing through his parted lips. The sound was a dry sucking, like wind on paper.

The man called Tommy moved over beside Al, leaned down and felt of Al's calf, pinching it. "I break it? Is that what you want? I break your leg for you?"

Al abruptly shoved with the heel of his hand against Tommy's head, a brutal straight-armed thrust. Tommy danced sideways, nearly losing his balance. The eyes narrowed then, and he stared straight at Al.

Al looked at Noah. "I'm going to have a go, old horse."

Noah did not speak. But Al couldn't face the look in his eyes.

"Yes," Rebecca Prince said. Her eyes were bright with the excitement and suspense of the moment. They seemed to shine.

"It may take time," Al said, mostly to himself.

He began examining the wall. There had to be a secret, and he did not have the least notion what that secret was. He tried to remember all Alister Mundy had taught him through the years. But there was nothing remotely concerning a problem of this type. The wall was immense, perhaps twenty feet square. The intersecting boulders were joined so closely Al knew he couldn't slip a knife blade between them. How had those ancient people done this?

"Don't be too long," Silvester said.

"You're very sly, very bright, very humorous," Al told the man, without turning. "But this is when you mind your own lousy business."

"I could cut his ear off," Tommy said in a hissing whisper. "You saw him push me, Howard. I could cut his ear off. It would bleed some, but he would be reminded that he should hurry—and also, that he is doing this for us. For us! You hear that, Mundy?" Tommy's voice was running away with itself, the words spewing from his lips. "You want me to slice your ear off, Mundy—"

"Shut up, Tommy," Silvester said.

"But he pushed me—you saw him!"

"I said shut up!"

Al hardly heard them now, trying to reason out the problem of the vault. He had one thing to go by: Amos Robinson had opened it somehow. If Robinson could do it, so could he. He stepped close to the wall and ran his hands over the stones. He pressed them tightly, as tightly as he could. They were solid. He rapped on them. Though it registered only in a small way, he could tell that there was hollow space beyond those immovable boulders.

Rebecca Prince was close by his side. "Can you do it, Al?"

"I don't know yet."

She felt the rock surface. Her fine hands palmed the intersections of stone. Her shoulders slumped under the green blouse. Her hand dropped to her side and again she looked at Al. This time resignation showed on her face. Her eyes had lost some of their sparkle. She turned away.

Al kept thinking about his father. Was he all right? Or had Silvester already killed him? He knew the man would lie in his teeth to get what he wanted; Al could not go by what he said. And what of Nesha Robinson? Where was she? How had she got away? Did they have her too?

He knew he had to open the vault. Professionally, he was willing to let it go. There was Noah to consider. The aims of the U.S. This might well finish him with the SIA, if he lived through it. If he could open it, it would be a kind of betrayal. Should he really try? He had said that he would; but he knew he'd just been stalling for time. But he needed more time—time to think. It was a rotten puzzle. . . .

A puzzle.

Something slipped into place in Al Mundy's brain. He stared closely at the intersecting boulders, then turned and looked at Noah.

"I'm sure I know how to open it," he said quietly. "The thing is now, should I?"

Noah's tone was as quiet as Al's. "I'm not going to plead with you. I'm not going to say anything. You know what I think, what I believe."

"Do it, Al!"

It was Rebecca Prince. She came up to Al and gripped his arm with tense fingers. "Open the vault."

Al said nothing.

Abruptly he turned back to the wall. He had made up his mind. Taken his choice. There was the chance, and more than once during his life he had taken that very last chance. It had always paid off, up till now.

Would it work this time?

He carefully began going over every boulder. He started at the right-hand side of the wall, and by reaching on tiptoe, he could touch the top stone. He worked his hands, both of them at once, over each boulder. He went along the base of the wall, close to the floor.

"We hope you're not putting on a show, Mundy," Silvester said. "We sincerely hope that."

Al said nothing. He continued working. Then, halfway along the middle of the wall, he felt the boulder give. He paused. He had no way of bargaining with Silvester. He knew he had to do what he'd started. There really was no other way.

Al Mundy's face was as expressionless as the stone he worked on. The deep blue eyes were stern now, the mouth slightly drawn at the corners. There was no humor now. Only a steady, deadly earnestness.

The boulder moved at his heavy thrust. It sank back into the wall with a disturbing smoothness, the entire boulder. Al did not know how it was done, only that it had been done. Now the problem. The puzzle. But he'd always been good at this particular kind of puzzle. And modern man thought it was a recent one: the puzzle of moving blocks.

He placed his palms flat on the rock to the right of the declivity where the other stone had sunk into the wall. The boulder slid over and took the other's place.

Now he had a fresh nook. He reached up and drew the overhanging boulder down.

He heard Silvester give a light, dry gasp.

He kept working. He worked fast, now. Again he moved a boulder to take the other's place, and again, working the puzzle as if it were one of multicolored plastic blocks in his lap. A children's toy. But this was the most monstrous vault he had ever considered. The combination was of an original kind. He had never faced such a proposition. If he lived . . .

He turned to Silvester.

"You'll let my father go, if I open it?" He held up one hand. "I guarantee it's not open yet. And you wouldn't be able to open it without my help."

Silvester began to talk, but Al wasn't listening. A pained expression was on Al's face. He knew he could not take the other's word for anything. He knew he had to complete his job.

"Don't do it, Al," Noah said.

Al turned to the wall. He reached up, and with both hands tugged at a high boulder. It slid slowly, excruciatingly into place.

Al stood back.

Immediately the entire wall split in the middle and began to fold back upon itself in two wings. The walls moved slowly, and there was a faint grating sound. The walls continually moved, gigantically, until they were flat against the inside surface of still another room.

Beams from flashlights, and light from the glaring Coleman lantern shone into the room, the vault. It was all golden, the walls, the floor, the ceiling. It was perhaps ten feet square. The dull golden light was rich. Outlines of Egyptian figures were embossed on the gold.

In the exact center of this ten-foot-square vault was a four-foot-square black stone box.

Silvester's voice was strident. "The scroll of Tre Henda —it's in that box."

As Al looked at Noah, he felt certain misgivings. What the SIA man thought was written in his eyes. He was frowning, and the corners of his lips turned down in disgust.

"I'm sorry, Noah."

Noah said nothing, but the look in his eyes did not change. It said, *You've let me down. You've failed me.*

Al couldn't take that look. He stepped quickly over to Noah and whispered fast in his ear, "Don't worry—it's not over yet."

Silvester was quickly at Al's side, the gun probing his back. "You will not whisper."

Al turned to the Chinese agent. "You know what you can do," he said.

"Go into the vault. Open that box."

"Not because you said to."

Al, however, did enter the golden vault now. He approached the black box, leaned above it. It, too, was made of stone, and looked to be of one piece. He was certain it wasn't. He checked it, and knew how to open it. He hated doing it.

He pressed the side, near the top, then slid the top off. It was a thin layer of black stone. He laid it on the floor, beside the box, looked inside. He saw another black box, fitted perfectly inside the larger one. He checked this, removed the lid, only to discover still another box. This box was red, glistening as if it had just been freshly painted. He laid aside the other lid, then opened the red box. Inside was a green box, gleaming in the light from the Coleman lantern.

"My God," Rebecca Prince said. "What have they done?"

"Probably there was some kind of ceremony connected with the laying away of the scroll," Al said. "And I imagine somebody was buried in this vault, along with the scroll. Maybe Tre Henda himself, for all we know. Robinson never said anything about that. But I think it's true."

"Hurry," Miss Prince said. "Make sure the scroll's here."

"It's here, all right," Al said.

He opened the green box. Inside was a yellow box.

There were seven boxes in all before Al came upon the golden box. When he reached this, he knew he had come to the end. He opened it carefully. It was different from the others. He had to take the box out of the black container and set it on the floor of the vault. When he opened it the lid separated, something like the vault walls, and he looked inside.

A heavily embossed silver box, build in a rectangular shape, was inside. He lifted it out, glancing at Silvester as he did so. The Chinese agent's black eyes were avid.

The lid of the silver box was hinged with delicate golden filigreed handiwork. The embossing on the box revealed, apparently, a day in the life of an early chemist. The lid was fastened with a tiny solid silver catch. Al unsnapped the catch, lifted the lid.

Inside lay a papyrus scroll. . . .

It was tied around with black ribbon, and there was a small note, written on white paper, attached:

May you do the right thing. Amos Robinson.

"Here's the damned scroll," Al said.

Silvester was already beside him. He snatched the silver box from Al's hands, took one look inside, and

closed the lid tightly. The light in his eyes bordered on the blatantly insane. He tried to say something; his lips moved, but for a moment no sound came.

"Come with me," he managed at last. "Tommy, keep your gun on them. Watch them closely."

"But—" It was Rebecca Prince. "I'm the only one here who can tell if that scroll's genuine. Let me see it."

Silvester regarded her with those wild eyes, that crazy, lopsided grin. "No," he said softly.

Noah's voice was sharp. "You satisfied, Al?"

"No. I'm not satisfied." He turned to Silvester, grabbed the man's arm. Silvester leaped back, brnging his gun to bear on Al again. "My father," Al said. "You gave your word."

"Move along then. Leave the pyramid."

Al picked up the lantern and started through the entrance hall. Noah followed slowly.

"I've got to see that scroll," Rebecca Prince said.

"Shut up," Howard Silvester said. "You'll see it if I feel like it. Otherwise you will not see it." He motioned with the gun. "Now move."

They started back toward the entrance to the pyramid of Kra Hotep.

XVII

Moving slowly along the dark, rubble-walled street in the ancient Egyptian city, with a gun at his back, Al felt a distinct fear. It was bad enough, knowing Noah's mood of despair, of hopelessness. It was worse, musing on what could happen now. First of all, was Alister Mundy all right? Was he even alive? There was no telling. Also, there was a sense of loss. The Red Chinese agent had the dangerous scroll, the formula for perhaps the most deadly nerve gas the world would ever conceive. Al himself had been the direct means by which that papyrus scroll was delivered into the wrong hands.

Everything Amos Robinson had so feared was coming true in the worst way.

Rebecca Prince came up to Al's side. She spoke quickly. "There's no telling," she said. "It may not be the right scroll. We don't really know. Just one look and I could tell."

"It's the right one," Al said disconsolately.

"Where can Nesha be?" Miss Prince asked.

Al didn't even bother to answer. He looked around once at Noah. The SIA man would not look back at him. Shoulders slumped, he plodded along the shadowed street like a beaten man. Apparently he had lost all sense of hope.

Tommy, Silvester's right-hand man, was close by, his face expressionless.

"Here we are," Howard Silvester said.

Al glimpsed a yellow glow in a nearby building. It was not a building, actually, but four crumbling walls that stood just off the street. A shell. A narrow doorway revealed the saffron light.

"Go in there," Silvester said sharply.

They entered. A kerosene lantern stood in the center of the room, casting weird gleams on the ancient walls. In the right-hand corner, up against the wall, was a prone figure. A man. Alister Mundy.

At first Al's heart rocked. Had they killed him?

But then he saw the figure move. He rushed to his father's side. Alister Mundy was bound tightly, professionally, hand and foot. There was a gag in his mouth, securely held in place with adhesive tape.

"This'll hurt," Al said.

Alister's eyes laughed.

Al pried loose a corner of the tape, then yanked. It peeled away, and Alister spit out a wad of cloth.

"I daresay I've tasted better gags in my time," he said. He smiled at Al. "Got a rinse handy?"

"Sorry, Father."

"No sweat," Alister Mundy said. "To borrow an expression. Would you kindly unfasten me?"

Al worked on the tight bonds.

Alister said, "I take it you found the scroll?"

"Yeah."

"Against my wishes," Noah said. "I begged him not to open the vault. He insisted. If it hadn't been for you—"

Alister glanced at Noah. Noah averted his eyes.

Al untied the last of the bonds and Alister stood up gingerly, rubbing his wrists. He sighed. "Sorry, Noah —sorry I'm even here."

"I thought Nesha might be here, too," Al said. "She's missing."

"Probably Rat-fink's done something with her." Alister turned to Silvester. "Where's the girl, Rat-fink?"

Silvester ignored him. He was staring at Rebecca Prince, chewing his lower lip. Suddenly he took a step up to her and held out the silver box.

"Would you look at the scroll?"

"Say please?"

Silvester's eyes became dark slits.

"All right, let's have it."

He handed her the box. She took it, knelt beside the lantern, and opened the lid. She withdrew the rolled papyrus scroll, unfastened the black ribbon, dropping Robinson's note on the floor of the roofless room. Al picked the note up, pocketed it, and glanced up at the stars overhead.

He heard the scroll unwinding: dull, crisping sounds.

He looked at Rebecca Prince. She was hunched over the scroll, staring at arrays of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs.

"Yes," she said in a harsh whisper. "It's the formula. It's Tre Henda's formula. It's the scroll."

"Give it back to me, little one," Silvester said.

"I want to read some of—"

He kicked her on the shoulder. She looked up at him, her face pale, her mouth a crimson slash.

He kicked her again, more brutally this time. She fell to one side on the flat-stoned floor.

Silvester, making tiny throat noises, leaned down, rewrapped the scroll, placed it in the silver box, closed the lid, and tucked the box beneath his arm. He wasn't going to let go of that box for anything.

"What do you think he's planning, Alexander?" Alister Mundy asked.

"I hate to say."

"I think I know. I don't like it. I'll tell you if I'm right. You see, I know the mind of a schemer."

"So do I, Father—quite intimately, in fact."

"We're returning to the pyramid," Silvester said. He tightened his lips, but a weird laugh burst past them. His head shot backward, and he began to laugh loudly. His chest heaved, his throat worked.

Al took a tentative step toward the man.

Tommy's voice was loud. "Don't try it."

Alister Mundy's eyes were veiled, heavy-lidded. They seemed to say, *Wait—just wait. . . .*

"What do you mean?" Rebecca Prince asked Silvester.

His laughter was subsiding. Then it abruptly ceased altogether. He looked narrowly at Miss Prince. "I've had the most marvelous thought. We're all returning to the pyramid of Kra Hotep."

"Why?" Al asked.

"Do you think I'd let you go now?" Silvester said, his voice smooth and soft, almost womanly. "Do you think for one minute I'd give my real word to you? You are the enemy. My enemy. You have done your job, Mr. Mundy." He paused, the lantern's light playing yellowly across his Oriental features, his eyes glinting. "Think of it. Alister Mundy. Al Mundy. Noah Bain. All in one package, and a certain Miss Prince to boot. The two Mundys. Father and son. Internationally famous, or should I say *in*famous? The son a United States secret agent of the SIA."

"Get off it," Al said.

"Yes," Silvester said. "You want to know what I plan?" He glanced at Tommy. "Really, my boy, it's most de-

licious." He looked back at Al. His voice lost its humor. It was flat, quiet. "I'm going to put you all in the vault, and close the walls on you. Think you can open it from the inside, Al Mundy? I know you can't."

Al knew that too.

Alister Mundy's voice was grim. "I was right," he said.

XVIII

Apparently the Chinese agent did not know Nesha Robinson had been with them. This puzzled Al. He glanced at Rebecca Prince. The girl looked frightened, as Silvester motioned them toward the doorway with his revolver.

"You can't do this," she said.

"Little girl, are you in any position to stop me?"

Miss Prince and Silvester studied each other. Al knew she was fighting for time, probably expecting him to do something. There was nothing he could do, not at the moment. Alister Mundy watched with quiet eyes, his face without expression. Noah looked ill, and Al felt sorry for the man.

"You promised you'd let us go," Miss Prince said.

"No such thing," Silvester said. He gave a short snort of laughter. "You people are so utterly naïve. You think you live by codes of honor, childish principles. You are decadent, don't you realize that? There are no codes, no principles, nothing but what the heart tells is true. I, for example—I know I am right in what I do. I'm in a position to dictate." He smiled briefly and his eyes glittered. "You are all basically children. You believe in the impossible. You are my captives. You think I would allow you to live? Never." He paused, staring at each of them in turn. "But instead of killing you outright I'm putting you in that vault—you'll be one with

history. You'll have a chance to talk, to think. Imagine. You may even come to the correct conclusion in there. Confinement of that sort often induces a kind of genius in one's thinking. At last you will see the light." Again he paused. "Only it will be too late."

"You're remarkable," Alister Mundy said. "Talking about the heart. What do you know about the heart?"

"Don't tempt me to shoot you where you stand. I know what you think of me." His eyes brightened and waned, like tiny fanned fires. "All my life it's been like this: people thinking they're better than I am. People trying to do me harm—behind my back. If I turned my back now, you would kill me without compunction. The same with Tommy. But—me. I'm better than you are. I have a finer type of mind. *I* know this, even if you don't. And now, when I return to my country, I'll be lauded. They'll know about me. They'll praise me. There will be ovations in my honor. They will no longer mock me."

Nobody said anything.

Silvester was quite pale now. His lips trembled. "I've done a great thing," he said. "We'll take care of you—and yours. Your stupid nonchalance. Your stupid country." His voice rose. "We'll wipe you out. All the decadence will vanish. There will be a bright tomorrow, one in which we shall rule."

"I suppose you plan to rule the world?" Al asked.

Silvester's face was wrathful. He tried to speak, but nothing came. He turned abruptly and spat against the wall.

"Get out of here!" he shouted. "Back to the pyramid. Tommy, watch them—shoot to kill if they make one wrong move."

Alister glanced at Al and shrugged, but a tiny smile flickered at the corners of his lips.

They marched out of the building shell and entered the ancient Egyptian street again. The stars gleamed brightly. The moon shone steadily upon them, moonlight spreading like silver wash over the rubble. Moonlight lay like snow atop the pyramid of Kra Hotep.

They moved slowly along the street. Al knew that both Tommy and Silvester would shoot at the first move he made. But he also knew he had to make that move. Something had to be done before they entered the vault. Silvester was right: he could not open the vault from the inside. He was certain of that. There was absolutely no chance. The vault was so arranged that the blocks could only be worked from the outside. Once they were in the vault, there was no escape.

It would be a hellish death. . . .

They approached the pyramid, walking toward the flat stone platform that lay before the door. It was like a funeral procession. They all moved as slowly as possible, to delay the inevitable.

"Inside," Silvester said as they came to the dark doorway. "Try anything and we shoot. Understand?"

Nobody answered him. Al went first. Tommy was directly behind him, holding his revolver in one hand, the Coleman lantern in the other.

They walked along the passageway. Al tried to think of what he could do, came up with nothing. They reached the big circular room, the halfway mark. Al looked at Silvester. The man was obviously taking immense pleasure in what he was doing. He carried the silver box containing the papyrus scroll tightly beneath one arm. There was a fine sheen of perspiration across his brow and upper lip. His eyes were like glass.

They continued along the passageway and all too soon reached the hyena room.

"Move it—don't waste my time," Silvester said, motioning with his gun toward the entranceway to the vault, the fan-shaped room that lay before the folded, open walls.

They all stood looking into the golden vault.

"And now," Silvester said, "I bid you goodbye. I hope you entertain pleasant thoughts in there, though I greatly doubt it."

Miss Prince was revealing intense agitation. She breathed rapidly, her breasts rising and falling sharply. She looked from one to the other, searching their eyes. Her crimson lips were drawn.

"Into the vault," Silvester said.

Al glanced at his father; at that moment Alister Mundy lifted his hand and tugged at his nose, giving it a sharp wrench. His eyes laughed.

Al leaped, kicked for Tommy's gun, and from the corner of his eye saw Alister dive for Silvester. Tommy's gun spiraled across the room, and the Chinese agent gave a yell. Then Al was upon him. The man was a coiled spring of muscle. Al no sooner connected with the man than he was thrown off, hurtled across the room. He landed on his back. Tommy raced over the floor for his revolver. Al came at him again in one long movement and tackled his legs. They went down.

The man's coarse fingers were somehow on Al's throat. The Chinaman squeezed brutally with his thumbs in a series of cruel thrusts. Each time he thrust, he gave a sharp cry, like the Japanese when they were fighting. He had been trained.

Al fought to squeeze his chin down. It didn't work. He lowered his head. His view was swimming and his

stomach felt giddy. Another moment and he would go under. He clenched his fists, brought them violently up between Tommy's wrists, smashing the hold. He did not hesitate, but drove his right fist into the man's face.

Tommy struggled wildly, rolled to one side. Al dove at him, searching with quick fingers for the pressure nerve point in the vicinity of the medulla oblongata. He found it and dug savagely. Tommy went limp.

Al came to his feet in a rush.

Silvester, with his gun still in one hand, was fighting desperately with Alister Mundy. But as Alister gripped the Chinese agent's wrist, the revolver crept ever so slowly toward Alister's neck. There was a grim, determined smile on Silvester's face.

Al swung, slugged Silvester in the side of the head. It broke the hold Alister had on the Chinaman's wrist. Alister fell back.

"Now!" Silvester said, bringing the gun up.

Al leaped directly into the gun, grabbing wildly for the gun itself in an attempt to deflect the shot. The revolver exploded. The slug ricocheted off the floor, shrieking. Al had the man's gunhand. He was close to Silvester's savage face. Silvester made a heaving effort with his arm. Al fought to break the move. The gun whipped down, fired again, and this time it fired into the Chinaman's solar plexus.

Startled fright registered on the Chinese agent's face. The gun spun across the room. He fell back two steps. His mouth opened and he clutched at the bleeding wound.

"You've killed me," he said abruptly, and crumpled to the floor.

Tommy still lay across the room.

Al turned and grinned at his father.

"That's that," he said. He looked at Noah, expecting sudden pleasure at last. Instead, the man was staring past Al's shoulder, his eyes wide, his mouth drawn.

"Don't move." It was Rebecca Prince.

Al whirled.

Miss Prince had retrieved Silvester's revolver; now she stood over the fallen silver box containing the scroll. She was near the doorway to the other room, her deep blue eyes sparkling.

"Just don't move, any of you," she said softly. "I'm sure to hit what I aim at. I've been trained. Trained well. I'm an expert marksman, even though I've had little chance to prove it in the field."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Al asked.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You're a nice guy. You're all nice guys. But I have to consider myself." The gun in her hand was steady. Her breasts rose and fell as she breathed deeply. Al could see she meant what she said. There was desperation in those dark blue eyes, but there was certainty, too, a sureness that could not be mistaken. "Sorry to disillusion you, but I may as well tell you who I am. I work for Russia, and have all my life. I've been trained since childhood. Perhaps you've heard of the Soviet program for Russian children born in the British Isles? Some of us are carefully selected, even before birth, to become useful people. To devote our lives. I am one of those. I am dedicated."

Noah groaned softly.

A smile touched Rebecca Prince's lips. "It's too bad, isn't it? A bloody shame? And even I thought things were lost for a minute there. But they aren't lost—thanks to you, Al. You're a real steamboat. You use your loaf, I will say that. And you," she said, turning her

gaze quickly to Alister, "you're not so bad yourself, dad."

"What do you plan?" Al asked.

"If either you or Alister make one move—if you as much as nod your head, I'll kill you." She hesitated. "You're going into that vault, just as Silvester wanted. I hate the Red Chinese. They're stupid. I abhor them. But he was right. It's a fitting way, a right way for you to die. Kovotov will be happy. We're bringing home the bacon. Your country would probably destroy Tre Henda's formula. Imagine. Wiping out a thing of that kind when it can be put to such good use."

Al saw the moving shadow in the other room, by the doorway. It was behind Rebecca Prince. Miss Prince continued talking, her voice bitter, but Al wasn't listening now. He carefully, surreptitiously, watched the doorway.

Suddenly he saw Nesha Robinson's face. It was a pale, frightened face, but there was something deliberate about those eyes. The pale hair swung along the sides of her jaw, brushing her shoulders.

Nesha Robinson stepped quietly up behind Rebecca Prince, then leaped like a cat onto her back. She grabbed wildly for the gun. It fired. The slug struck the wall. Rebecca's gun hand waved around like a branch in a strong wind. Nesha had the girl around the throat.

Al was fast. He grabbed Miss Prince's wrist and twisted it. The gun fell to the floor.

"You can let go, Nesha," Al said.

The girl got off Miss Prince's back.

"I managed to run out when Silvester came in," Nesha said. "I've been hiding out there, wondering what to

do. There was nobody I could go to for help, I realized. I knew *I* had to do something—myself."

Al grinned. "And you did. Good girl."

They regarded each other and Nesha smiled slyly.

Rebecca Prince stood absolutely still. Her face was grayish now. Fury was in her eyes, but it was an impotent fury.

Alister Mundy looked at Al and raised his eyebrows.

Tommy, over on the floor, was rising now. He moved dizzily. Noah held Silvester's gun. He wasn't smiling, and there was determination on his face.

Al said, "You okay, Noah?"

"Yes."

"Don't be so abrupt."

"I don't know if I could stand a thing like this again," Noah said. "It was too close—much too close."

Al patted the SIA man's shoulder. "Just be calm," he said. "Everything's okay now."

Alister picked up the Coleman lantern and the silver box containing the scroll.

"Shall we go?" he asked.

They started through the long dark passageway, keeping the gun on Rebecca Prince and Tommy. To Al, the walk seemed interminable. Nesha was close by his side, holding his hand when they went single file. They passed through the domed circular room, and Al was glad to be leaving the pyramid of Kra Hotep. He hoped they had not disturbed the ancient gods too much.

Alister stepped through the entranceway, out onto the large stone platform. The night was quiet. The stars glittered in the still, velvety sky. Suddenly Alister put down the silver box. He extinguished the lantern. Al held a flashlight, the beam on his father.

"What's up?" he asked.

Alister quickly unscrewed the cap on the lantern.

Noah was herding Rebecca and Tommy together, a few steps away. He turned and stared at Alister.

Alister, working very fast, took the papyrus scroll from the silver box, dropped it on the platform, then doused it with gasoline from the lantern.

"Stop!" Noah shouted.

Alister was grinning crookedly. With a quick movement, he dropped a lighted match onto the scroll. Flames burst five feet high in the night. Noah stepped back.

"Keep the gun on Miss Prince and Tommy," Al said.

"But—he's burning the scroll." Noah's voice was desperate.

Alister held his hands up for silence. "Believe me," he said, "the world is much better with that gone. I just wanted to make certain. I dare say you'll recover, Noah."

They all stared at the leaping flames, the withering black, ember-touched crisp of the burning papyrus scroll.

"Maybe you're right," Noah said. "I witnessed it, anyway. I know it's gone."

Al cleared his throat. "How do you feel about me now? I only did what I had to do, old horse."

"Yes," Noah said. "I guess you did at that." He gave a quick smile, hunched his shoulders. Then he said, "But, Al—I can't figure how you knew where to find the entrance to the vault. Robinson said, 'The laughing hyena watches.' But they were all laughing, Al. There were hundreds of them, all facing in different directions."

"Sure, baby," Al said. "But there's an old adage, 'People look, but they don't see.' If you go back in there and really look, you'll find that only one of those jackals has eyes. He was staring directly at the projecting ledge that opened the wall leading to the vault."

Alister Mundy chuckled quietly, winked at Al.

Al turned to Nesha Robinson. She smiled softly. He took her hand, gave it a little tug, and they walked from the platform into the silent darkness.

"Al," Noah called. "Our work is done. Come back here, Al." His tone was petulant.

Al laughed gently from the cool, desert darkness.

"Speak for yourself, Charley," he said. "I need my relaxation."

An exciting new adventure series
based on the smash ABC TV show

IT TAKES A THIEF

37598 — 60¢

IT TAKES A THIEF #1

The Devil in Davos by Gil Brewer

When Mundy's undercover assignment took him to a glamorous ski resort in Switzerland, he faced deception, torture and death.

37599 — 60¢

IT TAKES A THIEF #2

Mediterranean Caper by Gil Brewer

Mundy's job: to out-guess and out-fight enemy agents in the search for a notebook with the secrets to a revolutionary new ABM system.

Ask your newsdealer, or order directly from Ace Books (Dept. MM), 1120 Avenue of the Americas, New York, 10036. Please enclose 10¢ handling fee for each book.

If you have missed any full-length U.N.C.L.E. adventures starring Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin, ask your newsdealer for them, or use order form on this page and the following page:

ACE BOOKS (Dept. MM)
1120 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10036

Please rush me:

.....copies 51669, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #1,** *The Thousand Coffins Affair* by Michael Avallone.

.....copies 51671, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #2,** *The Doomsday Affair* by Harry Whittington.

.....copies 51673, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #3,** *The Copenhagen Affair* by John Oram.

.....copies 51675, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #4,** *The Dagger Affair* by David McDaniel.

.....copies 51677, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #5,** *The Mad Scientist Affair* by John T. Phillifent.

.....copies 51679, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #6,** *The Vampire Affair* by David McDaniel

.....copies 51681, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #7,** *The Radioactive Camel Affair* by Peter Leslie.

.....copies 51683, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #8,** *The Monster Wheel Affair* by David McDaniel.

.....copies 51685, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #9,** *The Diving Dames Affair* by Peter Leslie.

I enclose 50¢ per copy, plus 10¢ handling fee for each book.

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE ..... ZIP CODE .....

ACE BOOKS (Dept. MM)
1120 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10036

Please rush me:

.....copies 51687, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #10,**
The Assassination Affair by J. Hunter Holly.

.....copies 51689, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #11,**
The Invisibility Affair by Thomas Stratton.

.....copies 51691, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #12,**
The Mind Twisters Affair by Thomas Stratton.

.....copies 51693, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #13,**
The Rainbow Affair by David McDaniel.

.....copies 51695, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #14,**
The Cross of Gold Affair by Fredric Davies.

.....copies 51697, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #15,**
The Utopia Affair by David McDaniel.

.....copies 51699, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #16,**
The Splintered Sunglasses Affair by Peter Leslie.

.....copies 51700, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #17,**
The Hollow Crown Affair by David McDaniel.

.....copies 51701, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #18,**
The Unfair Fare Affair by Peter Leslie.

.....copies 51702, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #19,**
The Power Cube Affair by John T. Phillifent.

.....copies 51703, **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. #20,**
The Corfu Affair by John T. Phillifent.

I enclose 50¢ per copy, plus 10¢ handling fee for each book.

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE ..... ZIP CODE .....

Al Mundy's assignment in Cairo was almost incredible: An ancient Egyptian formula for a deadly nerve gas had been unearthed, and the discoverer, before dying, had hidden the formula inside an antique statuette. Al Mundy had to find that statuette and recover the formula — before the agents from Russia and Red China could get to it.

But the ancient papyrus led Al Mundy to a very unpleasant surprise....